University of Alberta

On the Waterline: Stories From the River

by

Brian Friesen

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in
English

Department of English and Film Studies

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 2006

Library and Archives Canada
Published Heritage Branch
395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et Archives Canada
Direction du Patrimoine de l'édition
395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-494-13732-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-494-13732-0

NOTICE:
The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:
L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

On the Waterline: Stories from the River

By: Brian Friesen

Abstract:

On the Waterline is a creative thesis that explores a handful of characters who live on boats in a marina on the Multnomah Channel near the Willamette River and the Columbia River, just outside of Portland, Oregon. One of the main threads woven through this collection of linked short stories is a young writer at the marina who is working to render the place and its people in his writing. Much of this character's writing revolves around several elderly men who meet regularly for coffee on the dock each morning.

On the Waterline explores the blurred line between fiction and creative nonfiction, and how stories shift and grow as they are told orally over time amongst those who live on the water. This collection explores Native American perspectives on the Columbia, erosion, the aging process, religion, and spirituality.

Table of Contents

I. How to Tell a Story on the River

1. Telling it Wide 2

2. Bearing Witness 15

3. Confessions 35

4. Invoking the Unseen 62

II. Balance

5. Larry's Journal – The Eremitical Life 96

6. Land Sick 111

7. Larry's Journal – If Will and Grace are Joined 132

III. The Lamp of the Body

8. Safe Lights 143

9. Larry's Journal – The Dream 169

10. Flames 173

11. Larry's Journal – Watchfulness 181

12. Some Fixed. Living Thing 184

IV. Lines on the Water

13. Larry's Journal – How to Join Earth and Sky 208

14. Below the Waterline 222

Works Cited 241

How to Tell a Story on the River

Telling it Wide

You heard the one about the guy that strapped a motorcycle onto the deck of his sailboat way back when? No? My old man started this story. Played the goddamn hero, the way he told it.

O.K. So, there's this guy. Liked engines and speed, but he also liked sailing. Couldn't decide whether he wanted to be a sailor or a power boater or a goddamn motorcycle demon. Whether to go fast or slow. So he tried to do it all at the same damn time - the speed of revved-up engines and the given pace of the wind. I mean, this guy was a real goddamn accident waiting to happen. As it happened though, when the accident was no longer waiting to happen, but actually was happening, it was happening to his small daughter, some four or five years old, and to his wife. Guy didn't stick around long enough to see what he had really done, though.

Even in the glow of the lamp that swung from the boom of a sailboat several slips upstream, I could still see the dark red spot on Norm's white T-shirt where the wine had run down his collar and pooled at the top of his stomach. It was late into the night. Early summer. A warm breeze came and went over the water. We had gathered to bid farewell to Jack and Edith, who were setting sail in the morning. As the evening wore on, people shuffled away down the dock to their boats. Jack and Edith left early, and when it became clear that Norm wasn't going to stop talking anytime soon, half a dozen others drifted off down the main walk. Soon there were only a handful of us left. Larry was still there, and Bill, and a few others, all of them

at least twice as old as I. Norm had been talking for hours already. His voice wavered slightly after he had coughed up a mouthful of wine, but it was slowly regaining strength as he spoke, as if his stories filled him with new life the further he delved into the past. The last jug of wine went around the circle. The breeze picked up again. The air around us filled with the song of the wind in the rigging, lines clanging into the hollow masts up and down the river. The dock rose and fell softly under our feet, and Norm continued.

You gotta understand that this was the 1930s. Way before all this damn mess of speedboats and those goddamn, what do you call 'em? Impersonal *watercraft. There were still folks around for whom an internal combustion engine on any boat smaller than a battle ship was still a brand-fucking-new marvel of industry for the common man. Outboard engines didn't work worth a damn, but you counted yourself fortunate to be able to spend all your time trying to make it run. Either that, or you were like my old man, and didn't bother with new junk just because it was new, especially if what you had was already working fine. Our family just stuck to steam and coal, or hitched up a team of horses to long ropes and pulled flatboats up and down the river like that from the shore. You could run a length of rope across the channel and pull everything from one side to the other with a couple of pulleys and literal horsepower. But that was just my old man holding out against the tide of progress. Most folks were hypnotized by the ability to make fire in the belly of an engine. People were still trying to figure out how to run the damn things, making spare boat engine parts out of car parts or whatever washed up on shore, wearing the*

parts out until they could find something else. You poured 100-proof into the tank when you ran out of fuel since there was more of that around on the river those days than any other combustibles.

The tensions between power boaters and sail boaters were still new back then too, and stronger, in a way. There was no such thing as lawsuits like we got them now and you could still express some of your thoughts with your fists or just by keeping a gun lying around. There were lines you just didn't cross then, partly because people knew where the lines were and respected them.

So anyway, there's this guy that didn't know that there were lines not to be crossed until it was too late. He was young enough that he couldn't remember before everybody had an engine on their boat. Imagine what this guy looked like to some of the old timers that were still on the river. He's got this sailboat. A fancy, new fiberglass thing, and he sticks a huge fucking prop on the end of his shaft. I mean, this prop was a monster, and pitched all wrong. It was almost as big as some of your puffed-up heads. Never mind that the speed of a displacement hull tops off at around 7 knots or so depending on the length of the boat. This guy thought the more noise he made, the more he was getting somewhere.

I used to see him going by, careless bastard, fenders still bouncing in the water long after he'd left the dock. The prop was even mounted all wrong - too high an angle - and it blew water into the air behind him as he went along. Today you'd call it inefficient motoring. Back then, you'd just call the guy an asshole. Incompetent. You'd hear that engine revving and see the water frothing up in his wake like a goddamn fountain while he pushed his puny six or seven knots worth of

hot air and fumes. Not that he noticed the big mess of water blowing out his backside - too busy with the wind in his hair and places to get to up ahead.

And he'd do it all with the sails up too, flapping away, boom swinging back and forth just above his head, canvas all ready to fill with wind for when he decided to slow the hell down. Thought he was really getting somewhere, that guy, getting to where the wind was really blowing. He'd see a patch of water out there somewhere with more wind wrinkling up the surface than in the patch of water where he happened to be, and he'd go racing over to it, his sails up and ready to go for when he got there. It got to where he didn't even bother to turn off the engine when he was cruising, even with the sails full of wind. Just throw her in neutral and milk that fucking breeze until a better one blows over the water someplace else.

And here's the real kicker. The real folly on top of it all and what finally did the guy in: He had himself an old Harley Davidson that he strapped up on deck. He must've ridden it up a plank of wood and onto the deck where he strapped it to the shrouds. Thought he might sail down to San Francisco and have himself a pair of wheels to zip around the hills with once he passed through the golden gate back when the "golden gate" meant more than just some fancy little bridge.

Turns out all the motorcycle ever did was weigh down the port side and hang up the jib sheets and leak oil all over the fucking deck. And did the guy ever clean up the mess? Well, I don't know, but my father was on the beach at Sauvie Island one day and saw the guy's daughter slip on the deck and fall into the river. My old man had one of the horses out for a run that morning when the motorcycle-sailor guy was

taking his daughter and his wife, out on the boat for a revved-up sailing trip to who the hell knows where.

Guy's wife's in the cabin and he's looking for wind somewhere on the horizon when the daughter slips and falls in. Guy's turning the boat, and she goes down under the hull and back to where that big prop is spinning away. For the first time in his life, the guy stops to turn around and face the stern and sees the red foam spraying up out of the water. By the time he gets the engine disengaged, the girl's body is drifting in the churned-up wake. The engine stops and the sails start scooping wind out of the air and pushing his boat away from the mess he's made.

What's a guy to do after he's killed his own daughter? I don't know, but this particular guy locks the tiller to keep the boat on a level tack and then he takes a knife out and opens a lane in the spring lines, climbs onto the motor bike, unstraps it from the shrouds and uses the straps to lash himself to the handlebars, and then he fires it up, and takes a long ride off the short deck and into the drink. The mother pops her head out of the cabin when she hears the motorcycle engine and when she sees the mess and it hits her what's happened, she falls back into the cabin, dead or unconscious, at that point, we'll never know.

So, right about when the guy climbs on the motorcycle, my old man sees what's happened and what's about to happen and he digs his heels in and takes the mare for a run downstream 50 yards or so ahead of the boat. Then he jumps down from the horse and tosses his boots toward the shore, grabs a length of rope and ties it around his waist and hears the motorcycle engine and the splash and turns to see the bike hovering for an instant on the surface of the water before it goes down. My

old man sees the woman falling backward into the cabin just after he dives into the water and starts swimming toward the middle of the river, where he hopes to intercept the sailboat on its course downstream.

Who knows what he was thinking, or if he was thinking at all, going after that boat, bringing that rope with him. Probably just the deep-rooted instinct that a length of rope is rarely a burden and usually a help. What help a length of rope might become is hard to see before you see how handy it might have been when you don't have it. My father grew up around horses and sailboats and he knew it by instinct: on or near the water, you could never have too much line.

Of course, for those of you who probably don't know any better, you wouldn't call it a rope on the water. You call it a rope when it's tied off to a horse, and then you'd call it a line the minute it leaves dry land. You don't "show" anyone "the ropes" on a boat. You show them the lines or sheets or halyards depending on what they're attached to: Bowline, spring line, jib sheet, main sheet or whatever. I suppose the minute my father tied that rope around his waist and dove into the water, it wasn't a rope anymore, but a line.

Sometimes a line is all that stands between you and the chaos that the wind and the river can bring. It's the old battle between man and nature, and all you have to hold onto, really, is a line. It doesn't matter how big or how fancy your boat is, you don't have lines, you're fucked. You've got no way of tying yourself off to anything, and life on the water just isn't possible unless you're hanging on to something else, whether it's a dock or an anchor or your own goddamn balls. Without the line, you're just drifting. That's what my father knew in his bones when

he was tying that line around his waist and diving into the water after that runaway boat.

So, the boat's still sailing downstream and my father is swimming for all he's worth to intercept it and his clothes are heavy with water by now and he sees that he's not gonna get to the spot he wants to get to before the boat does and that it's probably gonna pass him by and so he swims for all he's worth until the bow of the ship is sliding along in front of him, and the deck is still a ways off and way up there above the surface and it's not like he's gonna be able to jump up and grab on, so, real quick-like, he ties himself a big bowline knot and he tosses the line up toward a deck cleat and of course he misses the entire boat by a mile. So he's watching the stern fade away downstream, wondering about the woman onboard, whether she's hit her head, or broken her neck, or if she's sitting down there pulling her hair out, when something brushes into him from behind. At first, he thinks of the guy on the motorcycle somewhere below him – maybe the guy came loose and drifted up to the surface - but then he remembers the little girl, and he turns, and there she is, floating face up, feet forward, pushing into him, and he wretches a little and then starts to really lose it, getting sick for barfing right in front of the girl as if she might have seen it or smelled it.

Then, looking for somewhere else to look, he scans the south shore and across to the north shore, trying to judge which is the closest, since he's getting pretty tired by now, swimming in all those clothes. He decides to take the body over to Washington State. He reaches out for the girl's leg, thinking to tie the line to it so he can swim and tow the body, and so he doesn't have to touch her.

Get this. The leg moves. The girl makes this low groaning sound. She's alive. My father reaches for her and holds her, and tries to keep her head above the water. Her clothes are fairly torn up. Her skin is bone-white. One of her arms is gone above the elbow. Blood still pulsing out into the river. He wraps his line around what's left of her arm and pulls down tight on a couple of half hitches and that seems to stop the bleeding a little. The girl coughs. Her breathing is shallow. My father shifts her around onto his back, her body facing away from his, her arm up out of the water and her head lolling back over his shoulder. He wraps the line around the both of them once and cinches it down with a square knot and starts swimming back toward his horse on the Oregon shore, his strength having come back to him now that he's swimming for two lives rather than just his own. His back, pressed against hers, begins to grow warm.

By the time they hit the Sauvie Island shore and both of them were balanced up on that horse, speeding off toward civilization, the unmanned sailboat was still underway behind them. My father turned to look and the vessel was only a spot of sail on the river just about out of sight around the bend downstream.

So, the story leaves the river at that point, as far as the little girl's part in it. She lived. I knew her for a little while right after. She visited our place on the island a couple of times when she got out of the hospital, one sleeve draped across her chest and pinned to her opposite shoulder. Her eyes were always wide open. Whites all around the edges. I never saw her blink. Not even once. Some of her relatives came up from California to claim her; otherwise, my dad said he might have tried to adopt her.

Back on the river, the story goes on, as stories tend to do on the river. The Coast Guard couldn't find the motorcycle or the guy strapped to it. People thought maybe the bike landed on the bottom and just kept rolling along, God knows how far. Even the sailboat seemed to have disappeared for a short time. The wind kept filling its sails, blowing it all the way down to St Helen's Island where it slammed into the ground on the upstream side, tipped over, and sank, the mast sticking out of the river at an angle, like this, slapping sideways in and out of the water as the waves came along. The mother might've died then, maybe, trapped inside the cabin. There's a rumor that her wrists and throat were cut, though, so who knows.

End of story? Almost, but not quite.

Twenty or twenty-five years later, you started to hear about some diver that said he found the motorcycle when he was down there looking for something else. There was a skeleton strapped to it, still sitting in the chewed-up seat, and the rest of the bike was all rusted out. The guy on the motorcycle was all bones and teeth - all the crap long since washed out of his damn skull.

So there you go. The end? God, let's hope so.

Never heard that one? Well, I guess you guys weren't even in diapers back then. Crazy one, that story. Aren't many people left down here who'd remember to tell it, or to tell it right, or even listen right to a story like that one.

Now, let's get one thing straight about this tale. Somewhere in there, the whole thing turns into so much bullshit, right? That story's at a delicate point in its history. Been told a number of times before it got right here to us. Somewhere in there, it's probably gone off the tracks. But where? That's the question, right?

Where did the story come from? Mostly, my old man, but some of it has carried over the water over time from others. Maybe it starts to depart from history with my old man and what he told about what he saw and what he did. God knows how, but somehow, my old man takes a rope into the water and goes for a swim and ties all these knots and doesn't get tangled up in the line. Or that girl. She's in the water all that time bleeding out, and my old man just comes along and ties a few knots and saves the day? So then, what really happened? And how did it happen?

Maybe the bullshit comes from what others added to the story, people who weren't even there. I mean, that sailboat damn sure didn't keep her course into the wind all the way down to St. Helens, right? Around a couple of turns and into the wind without luffing at all or even tacking? Come on. And maybe nobody really found the motorcycle, or that damn skeleton, or maybe there wasn't really any motorcycle to begin with. I was just a little crapper back then. I'd swear the motorcycle was there the couple of times I saw that guy blowing around on the river - I can even see that bike now - but my telling about it over the years might have put it there, though. Who knows, the only shred of decent, living history left in the tale might be that my old man saw a body floating in the river once or that I used to have a distant one-armed cousin.

So you see, the story is in a dangerous way. It's becoming a wide tale. You know tall tales? It's kind of like that, except tall tales are for landlubbers who get bored stiff with their lives up on dry ground. The minute you find yourself bored on the water is the minute you'd better pay the fuck attention. You wouldn't call them tall tales on the water, now, would you? Things don't go up *here, you know?*

Houses, docks, boats - they spread out over the surface. They tie off to other things that are tied off to pilings, or they get tied off to an anchor that gets wedged into the river bottom, or they drift away, or they go down into the drink. It's that line I'm trying to talk to you about. Line goes from one thing to the next like the story when it gets passed down. And the whole thing spreads across the surface over time.

You watch how the motorcycle sailor story has flattened out over the surface and carried downstream. You watch how stories spread out over the water, over time. Girl fell in somewhere right over there, *on the other side of this island from us. According to the story, guy rides his motorcycle at the bottom of the river from* there *to who knows how far, maybe way the hell over* there. *Mother dies for the last time down about over* there, *half a dozen clicks downstream from us. The story moves, see, over the water, or under it. What goes under might be gone for good. Or it might float back to the surface later on. Point is, it's spreading out, a story like that one.*

That story is reaching the end of its life, probably. Maybe this is where it dies, right here today on this dock with you fellas. It's got the smell of bullshit all over it already and you've got to have a nose for it if you're going to tell the history there to be told instead of just the tale you want to tell or the version you think people might want to hear.

My pop tells his story and he tries to stay true to the facts, but the facts aren't the whole thing. And here's the tricky part. He also tries to stay true to his experience, and sometimes experience gets lost in the facts of the matter. You've got

to tell the facts in a certain way. Not everything worth remembering is recorded into history books. What do you want to remember? Just the facts?

I suppose if my old man wrote his story down straight in some damn history book, he'd probably feel he'd be enacting a kind of dishonesty to the experience of being there. So he tells it wide, and by doing so, he's walking a tight rope.

And that's right, it's a fucking tightrope - not a tight line *- since it's hanging above the river from one high spot to another.*

So, by now, my old man's story has been floating along for some time, and others have added parts of themselves to it. For me to tell his story, or for you to, is not just some walk in a goddamn park. More like standing guard, making sure the experience doesn't take over the facts, or the other way around. More like lashing down a sail in a storm. More like hanging by a string after falling through the hole in an outhouse. And it's a careful climb out, fellas.

Whatever grains of History are left in the world are embedded somewhere deep inside people and their stories. Find them there amongst the facts and the experience and what you've got is History. Goddamn capital-H-History. The best you can hope for is to keep those grains of History alive for a little while. They're decaying all around us even now, as we speak.

Like I said, tall tales are for the land. You can see them rising up from miles away like giant turds on the horizon. Wide tales gravitate in a different direction. Like if Larry here tells the exact measurements of the fish he caught, you'll never know what it was like for him to land that big beast that drove him up and down the

fucking river or how small he feels after the chase, or how big. Probably small, in Larry's case.

It's a delicate balance I'm talking about here, telling stories on the water. Stories that are on their way to being the truth, the whole truth, or almost nothing like the truth. So help you God. There are grains of History, facts, and experience all wrapped up together in there somewhere. You've got to get them to stay afloat without turning it into so much bullshit. So help you God. You're guardians, all of you, not a just a bunch of twits tipping back booze and shooting the shit, yammering about whatever floats along. So-help-you-God and the devil and the deep blue sea. Whatever help you can get.

Best to tell what you've got to tell right here on the water. Best to tell it on a dock like this one, right near where it happened. Best to look over the water while you tell it, since it's the river's story too. The river still carries the story along, remembers it, or at least helps to pull it out of you, helps you to find the balance you need while you tell it. When everything's rocking away under your feet, you and your stories learn that balance. Just go ahead and try and write it down on dry land in some damn book and see what you get. History with a goddamn lower case "h," that's what.

Got it? Living on the water. Talking on the water. Or even listening. It's a damn-d-dangerous business, isn't it? And some of you old farts *already smell like shit before you even open your mouths. And then some of you who aren't so old, well, careful what goes on between those ears.*

Bearing Witness

Norm tied off his skiff in front of the fuel dock and marched stiffly toward the sliding glass door. For the past few days, I had seen Norm float by the fuel dock on his skiff a few times but he hadn't stopped by until now. The small boat, a raft, really, made of plywood layered over more wood layered over Styrofoam, was flat, rectangular shaped, some six feet across and ten feet long. The edges were worn, the corners slightly dinged. It was hard to tell the difference between bow and stern when it was moored unless you saw the small two-stroke outboard hanging into the water on one side, or saw the opening on the stern wall of the thin phone-booth-shaped pilothouse mounted smack dab in the middle of the deck. When the skiff glided by, Norm stood half in the pilothouse and half out in the weather. One hand gripped a thin, black steering wheel and the other rested on the throttle. His dog raced back and forth from the bow to the stern as if deciding which end to jump off. On windy days, the water washed over the bow and Norm seemed to bob along the river in an upright casket with windows.

Norm reached for the door handle. The dog wandered around the side of the building.

"Skookum, you get back here! Goddammit, you'd *better* stick that fucking tail between your legs! Get over here!"

Norm enunciated his cuss words perfectly. No slurring. The consonants he spit out struck the air like the clacking of a typewriter. He barely moved above the waist; his neck and back hunched forward so that his face bent toward the ground.

He looked up at me through his eyebrows. No bending at the waist or turning his head. He turned with his feet. He seemed to face everything and everyone head on.

When he had closed the door behind him, he turned and looked at me again. We shook hands. He held mine firmly - hard enough that my eyes squinted a little.

"So you're young Chad, right? Sea sickness hasn't chased your guts back to the shore yet?"

Skookum came around the counter and paced back and forth at my feet, sniffing. I told Norm that I had lived on a sailboat for a few years a while back, and that coming to work here was kind of like coming home.

"Is that so?" he said as he turned and paced toward the wall of refrigerators.

Down near my feet, Skookum backed up and growled, a small whirring sound. Norm opened the beer fridge, pulled a can of Miller Genuine Draft from the shelf and placed it on the glass counter with a click. He told me to put it on the books.

"The books?" I asked.

I looked to where he pointed underneath the till and found a piece of paper with his name on it and a list of charges. Then he cracked the can open and held it in the hand I had recently shaken. The can shivered slightly.

It was late morning. The sun was out. I told Norm the weather looked nice today. I spoke in the habit of pleasantness and deferment as the new guy, learning my way in a new job, listening, and saying as little as possible. My wife had been a caregiver with a number of elderly clients, and we had lived for a while with a

number of them. I thought I had learned how to listen, the kinds of questions to ask, how to be nice, how to be pleasant. Norm would have none of this.

"I don't give a flying fuck about the weather, you asshole!" The corner of one eye held the smallest crease of a smile. His voice rattled but still carried what must have been, in the past, great depth and heat.

"Let's get one thing straight between you and me. There is no bullshit in here." He pointed to his left temple with his free hand. "You try to feed me any, you are going to be in a world of hurt, got it?"

I smiled. "Right, no bullshit."

"That's right. You learn quick. That's good."

"So, do you live down here?"

"What do you mean do I fucking live down here? I'm the goddamned harbormaster! I helped build this place! No bullshit, young man. You remember that."

I looked over to the corner of the store where Rich, the owner of the marina, had a large, paper-strewn desk. He was gone again, leaving me to fend for myself. I turned back to Norm who squinted one eye at me. I raised my eyebrows. He must have been kidding me. I said, "Harbor master, huh?"

"Goddamn right. They taught you to use that fucking computer at your fancy new desk over there first before all the important stuff, right? Well I live in the floating tub, the farthest one on the downstream side, which means I get to see every last piece of bullshit that comes floating down out of this place. You remember that."

Norm took a drink. A drop of beer hung from his chin. He didn't seem to notice, or didn't seem to care.

"So, I hear you just graduated. An English major, huh?"

I nodded. I told him I was mostly interested in creative writing.

He set the can back down on the glass with a light tap.

"Creative, huh? Well, that sounds a bit better than just plain old writing, I guess. Well, since no one has trained you about the important stuff yet, you ought to know that me and Skookum make our rounds through the marina twice a day checking on things: once at sun-up and once at sundown. You'll see us go by now and then."

Norm picked up the can and held it. He asked how the boss was treating me, how things were coming along. I asked which answer he wanted, the one where I say "fine and good," or the one where I tell the truth. He smiled and opened the door.

"You'll do fine. I'll tell you what answer I don't want out of you though. Don't you give me any bullshit! C'mon, Skook!"

So much for pleasantries. I watched from behind the counter as the dog hopped onto the skiff and Norm unwound the dock line with his foot. The outboard puttered to life and Norm drifted away.

* * *

Rich was gone most of the time. Gina, the only female employee up in the Rock Creek boat yard office, held the business end of Rock Creek Marina together by her calm presence more than anything she said or did. She was the one who saw my resume and pushed to get me hired. When I asked her about Norm, she told me that

he lived at the marina in exchange for looking over things. There were a handful of other tenants that had similar arrangements. She told me I would like him, that he loved poetry and literature, even though he could no longer focus on the small print with his deteriorating eyes. He had quite a few stories of his own up his sleeve, she said.

So, the day I met Norm was when I began to find out about the unofficial layer of business going on at Rock Creek Marina and the Boat Yard several hundred yards downstream near the lower section of the docks. There was no file for Norm in the employee records. Just an understanding that came, not from a file or a contract, but from knowledge of the place and its history, knowledge that I could only develop over time. There were no reports or files for many of the stories I would need to learn to be a *person* in the *place* that was Rock Creek Marina rather than an *employee* operating in a *position* there.

I began to wave at Norm whenever I saw him go by. Sometimes he would wave back, sometimes he wouldn't. Sometimes I could chalk it up to the bad eyesight. Other times, I wasn't sure. His dubious treatment of me seemed, at first, to be similar to the tentativeness I sensed from most of the inhabitants living in floating homes or aboard their boats at the marina. I was the new guy in the marina office on the fuel dock; it was too soon for anyone to tell what I wanted from this place, how long I would stay, too soon to tell whether I would ever belong here.

I wondered about these things myself. I had a *job* here, but I felt that my *work* was writing, or more generally, paying attention, bearing witness. Writing poems or thoughts about what I encountered helped to keep me alert for what I might not

otherwise notice. Living on the river a couple years back had helped me to begin to see the changes that took place as the weather and the seasons went by. There is always more to see. You never exhaust the possibilities. There are always little signals of change to look for in the elements above you or below you or approaching on the wind: the way the current moves under your feet, the colors and sounds of birds, smells, changes in temperature, humidity, and the annual shifting of wind currents.

My wife Abby had moved onto the water with me for the first year after we were married. But then she became pregnant with our son. We went shopping for a life jacket for the baby, but the only ones small enough were the ones made for chihuahuas and toy poodles. We decided to move back onto land.

So now, I wasn't living on the river anymore. I was working there. I was an employee, and it remained to be seen if I would ever enter *into* the place or be *of* the people on the river again. And I was young. And looked younger than I was. And I had been to college. It didn't matter what faculty or what degree. It was still college. I was suspect.

In the eyes of those who lived on the river, my official position at the marina was indeterminate at best compared to the positions of authority that Norm and some of the others held. Norm was rooted to the place. The river flowed in the marrow of his bones. His history seemed to grow right out of the history of the place. He was in his early eighties and had lived on the river all his life. Not just any river, either. He had lived most his life on *this* channel that flowed out of the Willamette and into the Columbia, the waterways that surrounded and created Sauvie Island, the largest

island in the state of Oregon. Norm's parents settled on the island before the First World War and Norm had lived there, or on the Oregon side of the channel since he was born, apart from a few stints here and there upstream or downstream or across the Columbia on the Washington side. He told of rowing across the channel to school in the late thirties and early forties, back when it used to get really cold. The river froze over once, he said, it was that cold. His family's was the first farm on the island to have electricity. They used to get called to the Oregon side of the Multnomah Channel to help roll dead bears or elk off the railroad tracks on the hill above the marina before they put the state highway in.

Norm had watched marinas come and go, watched them erode, watched rivalries develop between marinas, watched the tensions build between Native Americans and white men and fishermen and power boaters and sail boaters. His loyalties were with the river and those who had respect for it rather than those who wanted to use it at whatever cost.

* * *

I told Norm once, not long after I arrived, that I'd heard he liked literature. It was still early on in the fall. The sun was out. The wind was warm. He was sitting at a table on the fuel dock. Skookum was under the table, her head on her paws. I stopped near him, leaning on a broom. Norm smiled and said they couldn't print the letters big enough for him to read anymore. "Too many words in books, anyway. Better to hear someone tell you a story out loud than to read it in a book all by yourself. A story should be a community thing, not some lonely practice of one ego reading about someone else's ego." I nodded my head, and began sweeping again.

"Damnit, Chad! Watch the dust there! Leave some fresh air down there for the dog!"

* * *

Norm avoided going up on land as much as he could. Usually, he and Skookum got around by water. The only time I didn't see Skookum with him was when he came down the ramp after a trip to the grocery store, or the barbershop. Norm told me that she would have nothing to do with the land-water transition. "She won't do it without throwing a fit and I'm too damned old to carry her just so she can scratch the hell out of me. She'll only go from boat to dock or dock to boat. None of this land to dock stuff. And you know, I don't blame her. I like the way she thinks."

* * *

Working at the marina kept me busy outside as much as inside. I walked up and down the docks, making my rounds, checking on a broken water line, a new tenant just arriving, an old tenant neglecting a bill, a boat beginning to sink. Norm would let me know about some of these things, but mostly I found out when tenants stopped by to tell me or by making my own rounds through the marina.

Every once in a while, I would turn the corner around the side of the store and find Norm sitting on a bench in the shade, wiping his forehead and shivering faintly. He said he had emphysema, which forced him to take long breaks when walking even short distances. You wouldn't know it to hear him talk. When he spoke, he might go on for hours if you were willing to listen. Whatever stamina his body lacked, his mind, or at least his mouth, seemed to make up the difference.

His health was an unspoken concern around the marina. One woman named Marge lived in a sailboat with her husband not too far upstream from Norm's place and came into the office occasionally to let us know how he was doing. Marge's eyes were always rolling. She always seemed to be looking at the ceiling, shaking her head. When she wasn't breathing deep, emotional sighs, she was talking.

After returning one morning from a trip to get Norm's hair cut - a trip that had turned into late breakfast followed by shopping, she came to the store and said: "Norm kept adding whiskey to my coffee this morning at McDonald's, and now my day is going to be shot." Later that afternoon she stopped by again to say: "Norm's out on his deck sleeping in the sun again. I think someone should go check on him. I haven't seen him move in a while and there are flies buzzing around him. Should somebody do something?" Marge knew Norm about as well as anyone. She was the obvious choice to check on him. No one wanted to check on him, so it usually fell to me. I wasn't sure which would be worse: waking him up or not being able to.

Marge was one of the two or three people from the marina who transported Norm to the store, or to get a haircut, or to buy a jug of Black Velvet whiskey. There was Dory, who for several months during the summer ran a hot dog stand out on the fuel dock. There was Edmo, who liked to quote the bible and who traded his time between watching psychic channels and Christian broadcasting networks on his boat all day. Edmo said a beaver climbed aboard his boat occasionally at night to gather clothes and paper for a dam it was building. There was Larry, whose tall fish tales got taller and taller until he said one day that he saw a whale swimming up the

Columbia a hundred miles inland. Norm's choices for company made me question his immutable aversion to bullshit.

Once a month, Norm came into the store to catch up on his tab. He slapped his checkbook down on the counter. He had already signed his name in a tight, shaky scrawl on the bottom of the first check in the book and asked me to fill in the rest. "My writing is getting worse than a goddamn doctor," he said. While I made the calculations, he stood silently, gazing out the glass door to the fuel dock and the river beyond.

On the days when Norm was sleeping out in the sun, Marge would come into the office to let us know. "He is probably OK. Yeah, he is probably fine. Just thought I would give you guys a heads-up." Then I would use the excuse of checking the bilge pumps on the abandoned trawlers in the lower marina down near Norm's place to check on him, waiting at a distance until I was sure I could see his chest moving.

Once, I was waiting and watching by the end of the dock when Norm opened one eye at me and then closed it again.

"You can stop checking in on me, kid," he said. "You can stop right now."

I didn't move. I started to apologize.

Norm opened both eyes. "You're the kind of guy that needs Cliff Notes, aren't you? Let me make it simple. Get the fuck out' a here."

* * *

Every other summer, Norm made plans to move downstream or upstream or somewhere along the coast, but he always backed out of his plans at the last minute.

He made one of these "almost moves" while I was working there. I asked him about it one day when he came into the store.

"So, I hear you're leaving, Norm."

"Yeah. Enough is enough of this fucking backwater. I'm moving to the coast where my son has some land and a trailer waiting for me."

"Time to move downstream, huh?"

"Goddamn right. That's where it all goes."

He had all but signed over the deed to his floating home when he changed his mind. Rich told me it was always the same. He would believe Norm was gone when he was actually gone. "He's not going anywhere," Rich said. "He will die here and he knows it."

* * *

It was often difficult to read Norm's tone or mood. Exasperation sounded the same as gratitude or elation. Other times, he had the quiet intensity of impending volcanic activity. There were rumblings.

On a rainy day not too long after I arrived, I saw Norm approaching the fuel dock in his skiff, and I went out to help him. I grabbed my raincoat by the door. It was midday, but dark. Everything close by was a dull gray. Everything far off was lost in the haze of falling rain. Norm pulled up, and I reached from the dock to grab the bowline. Skookum saw me and barked. Norm shouted from behind the wheel.

"Get your goddamn hands off my boat, you asshole!"

I looked up through the rain. Not a trace of humor in his gaze. He lumbered out of the pilothouse and grabbed the line from my hands. He pulled his right arm

back, making a fist. I backed away with my hands outstretched, warding him off in a mock gesture, but he was not playing around. He straightened up, suddenly taller than me, looking down.

"Don't you know anything about boats, you cracker ass? If you aren't invited to touch a boat by the captain, then you stand back and mind your own fucking business!"

Norm stood facing me for a moment. The rain rattled on the water and the dock all around us. With the flick of a wrist, he sent a small roll down the bowline until it hooked onto the dock cleat. He flipped his hand two more times and pulled the line tight. The skiff was secure. It happened so fast I almost couldn't believe he had done it. I usually labored over the lines, readjusting them to pull boats in tight for fuel, especially in rolling water and rain like that day.

Norm was done and moving past me for the shelter of the office, glaring at me through his eyebrows. I had seen him punch men in the shoulders, joking around. These people would chuckle and then walk away rubbing their bruised arms. I had seen Norm strike like a snake. The roughhousing was playful but also held the understanding that he was no one to fool with. As he walked past me, I kept my eye on his hands. They were clenched into fists, and dripping with rain.

* * *

The fall settled in and the sun began to go down earlier. I started showing up to work at 7:00am instead of 8:00 in order to take advantage of the morning light, to enjoy the quiet of the river before the marina had completely woken up for the day. When I arrived in the morning, there was usually a small gathering of men drinking

coffee outside, or inside if it was cold or raining. It wasn't until I started coming to work earlier that I understood the regularity of their meetings. They might be done by 8:00, or they might go on late into the morning. Most of the men were retired, or on disability. Norm was always there, and Larry, who watched the dock on weekends. Sometimes there were others: Bill, and Tom. Edmo came regularly before he left the marina at the beginning of October.

One of my responsibilities at the end of each day was to fill the coffee maker so that it was ready for someone to hit the "on" switch first thing in the morning. Now I saw who started the coffee I had been preparing the night before. Norm and Larry both had keys to the store and would let themselves in before Rich or I got there. Now I also saw that there was a difference about the gathering in the early morning compared to the slow trickle of tenants and customers that came later. It wasn't that others weren't welcome to join the early morning gathering. The women at the marina weren't unwelcome, but they never came. The morning congregation of men was a consistent thing. There was a familiarity to it that did away with the guardedness that came later in the day when more eyes were watching and more ears were listening to catch something worth remembering. I tried to give the men space. I understood that I was stumbling in on something steady, yet fragile.

First thing in the morning, I kept busy on the fuel dock, getting things ready for the day, and some days - especially the cold days, when the men were inside - I could catch part of the conversation they were having. There were bar stools at the long counter that separated the office desks from the store shelves. I had a small notebook that I kept in my shirt pocket for taking notes when I caught comments I

thought to be fascinating, little details that taught me about the place. The men might talk about the fights they'd seen between sail boaters and motor boaters, they might list the alterations you need to make to a boat when you take it from fresh water to salt water. I kept my distance but remained attentive. I would turn to face my computer or go into the supply room and write things down. Norm might tell some story passed down from his parents about farming over on the island and how the floods would come and go, leaving behind piles of dead deer, bicycles and dying trees in the muddy fields.

Norm told once about a guy that had dropped his keys into the water. They were on a floater, and the guy went downstream to get them, but a huge sturgeon gulped them down, floater and all. The guy got out his fishing pole and waited in the same spot all day until he caught the same fish and dug the set of keys out of its guts. No one seemed to believe Norm. "It's not my story," he said. "It's just what I heard." At the other end of the large room, I wrote it down.

Every day, all day, the store offered free coffee to whoever happened by. The coffee was often what brought people in to talk, or order supplies, or schedule boat repairs in the yard. Rich saw the business sense of it, but the free coffee also sustained something of the spirit of the place that he did not seem to see – it was a different kind of drinking at the fuel dock than all the beer that was consumed in the afternoon and evening. Later on in the day, the talk always seemed to orbit around the subject of alcohol but those who came earlier and drank the coffee didn't talk about drinking coffee. The coffee was an occasion for something else. The kind of coffee didn't seem to matter. I never drank it. It was crap, really. Pre-ground generic

stuff. I had to open the large, bulk can with a can opener. The kind of coffee didn't matter to most of the tenants. The few coffee-related comments I heard over the months clued me in: drinking coffee at the marina was at least partly a statement as much as an occasion for connection. In light of the trendy urban fascination with lattes and mochas that cost 3 or 4 dollars apiece, free coffee was a chance to maintain a social border between the marina and the spread of suburbia up on land. It was a chance to emphasize the ritual of drinking, the habit held in common amongst others who were climbing their way into the day. Drinking coffee meant conversation. People would come by in the late morning after the employed tenants had left for work. They told stories and made connections over coffee long before bottles and cans of alcohol were opened – or at least before they were opened above the tabletops.

Since Rich was either always on the phone or away from the office, the tone of the marina was set by those who had been there the longest. From moment to moment, the tone had to do with whoever was there. I saw that certain people came in at certain times of the day in order to avoid running into certain other people for reasons I might or might not eventually learn. Mostly, people moved to make room for whomever and whatever might come. It took me some time to understand the undertones of words spoken or not spoken. There were power boaters and sail boaters and fishermen who respected each other's differences, but the physical space left between them was often big, even in a friendly conversation.

I saw just enough of these encounters to see how much changed when Rich told me to stop brewing coffee after 8:00. He seemed to think there were people

taking advantage of the gratuity. And so I stopped. I had no idea the effect this would have on the place. People stopped showing up at the store. At first, I welcomed the quiet. I actually got my paperwork done. But the empty coffee urn spoke volumes that Rich had not intended to speak. Few tenants asked about it. They just quietly started a kind of revolt. They brought to Rich an account of every nail that was loose on the dock or made requests for more dock cleats along their slips. Cracks and holes started to appear in the sewage lines leading to the marina bathrooms and the floating homes. Rich was unbending about the coffee, or else he didn't seem to understand. For about a week, everything at the marina changed. Rent was due that week and several dozen faithful tenants didn't drop their rent checks off.

The older men still came in early in the morning and started the coffee maker, drinking their fill. Even Rich knew better than to mess with them. There was sacredness to their morning ritual that seemed to hold the marina together, as if without it, the docks would break apart and float away, or something good about the place might start to erode.

It was Norm that finally got through to Rich. Rumor spread that Norm had paid a visit to the office late one night at the end of the week when he knew Rich would be there alone. Some said Norm had brought his shotgun with him and started cleaning it on the store counter while he talked to Rich about whatever it was he talked to him about. Norm left the glass counter top pretty greasy and let a few spent shells roll from the counter onto the floor (I found one under a shelf the next Monday). Some people said he asked Rich if he would be so kind as to brew him a cup of coffee. Others said he kept the barrel pointed at Rich's desk while he cleaned

it. Whatever it was that passed between the two men, Rich finally understood what had already become clear to everyone else: the unrest wasn't about the coffee so much as it was about what the coffee meant. It was about whose marina this was and the kind of place it would be. It was about the authority of management and the impulse to assert that authority.

Rich didn't say anything to me the following Monday morning. He just started filling the coffee maker through the afternoon until I caught on and took up the responsibility again. Tenants drank up the coffee with a renewed fervor talking at length now about its rich flavor and the pleasant aroma in the store. Many caffeine habits started that next week. It wasn't a return to "normalcy," though. Something subtle had shifted. Every once in a while, Norm brought his shotgun with him to the store in broad daylight. He would lean it up against the wall just inside the door and announce his arrival.

"Hello there, Richard," he said. "Good morning to you, young Chadwick! Have you heard? The ducks are in season. I'll just check this old thing in at the door!"

* * *

Sometime later that Fall, I was looking out through the window to watch a large powerboat leaving the fuel dock. The sun was bright on the water. Reflected light wavered on the massive hull. The deck was so high above the waterline that the captain didn't see Norm's skiff passing by to starboard. Norm swerved to avoid a collision. Norm shook his fist in the air and then gestured with his middle finger, but the powerboat captain was looking off downstream, unaware.

When Norm stepped into the office, his face was red. There were several others in the room, boat yard employees and tenants, but Norm turned to me. He let loose with a string of highly articulate estimations of the power boater and navigation rules: boats docked and boats under power, who had right of way. I took the brunt of his anger in silence wondering how shaken up by the near-accident he was underneath all the rage. Not only had he almost been plowed under by the larger boat, he had missed out on the satisfaction of letting the other captain know how he felt about it.

Norm opened a can of beer with a "pop" and shook his head, looking me in the eyes. For a moment, he seemed to run out of words. He had come in shaking in his fury but now his face was calm, his breathing slow. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

"Son of a bitch. I'm not afraid to call a man a son of a bitch, Chad. I don't care who he is. I'm not afraid to."

The others in the room continued to talk, ignoring, or pretending to ignore us. I still hadn't said anything. Norm looked at me for a moment. I smiled. It was the wrong thing to do. The wrong time. Norm leaned over the counter and spoke low. Now he had something to say to *me*.

"What are you doing here, Chad?"

I could feel my smile draining away.

"Are you furthering your education? Getting material? You planning to write about me?"

Norm stopped. I reached for words. "No. I mean... I write about whatever comes to mind, Norm. Mostly nothing and nonsense. I write for myself more than anything. Trying to understand where I am. If I didn't write, I would paint or something. Just trying to keep my head on straight."

"Listen, Kid. I've seen you pulling that little book out of your pocket there, taking notes when people leave the office. I'm not your fucking material, young man. I'm not dead yet, you know. Maybe I should do you a favor and throw that damn booklet of yours into the river."

We both breathed a deep breath at the same time. He seemed to sink down, like he had stepped down off the bottom rung of a ladder. His arm was draped across the counter. I let my shoulders drop, thinking we had both said all that needed to be said, but Norm looked up into my eyes again. When he spoke, the hard edge was gone from his voice, but his words ripped right through me.

"You're not going to see anything worth seeing if you've always got a pen going in your head, young man. If you can't sit still in a place for more than 5 seconds without taking notes, you're never going to end up writing about the place. It'll always just be stuff in your head. Understand? You were never there to begin with. You remember that, or you will never really belong anywhere."

He turned to leave, speaking over his shoulder. "Maybe you should write that down. C'mon, Skook!"

Norm shut the door behind him. I didn't write that down. I didn't write down much of anything else either for many weeks. I watched through the glass as Norm took a long drink from the can. Rich caught my eye, raised his eyebrows, and then

went back to his conversation with the others. I sat down in front of the computer, pulled the small notebook from my shirt pocket and put it in the back of a desk drawer behind a stack of files. Outside, Norm climbed onto his skiff, unwrapped the line with his foot and pulled out into the current.

Confessions

Larry tried to watch what the current was doing, listen to it, feel its many turnings under the hull as he pulled at the oars. Lifting, pulling, pausing to listen. The current had a way of shifting from one shore to the next on its way downstream along the channel before it finally split in half to flow around Coon Island.

The oarlocks rattled and squeaked, rattled and squeaked. He paused again to listen for the current under the boat. The water sounds had smoothed out. Where had that current gone to now? Larry turned to face the bow and looked out over the water, searching for folds in the smooth surface. No wind. If there had been wind, it would have pushed against the quicker current to reveal a dark, winding path on the surface of the water. Even without the wind, he still could have found it if it wasn't for all the fog.

Larry turned to face the stern again and pulled at the oars, his back and neck complaining as his muscles took the strain. The island would be coming into view around the next bend and then he would know. The Lendaways' massive powerboat would be there off in the distance, tied off on the transient dock on the eastern side of the island, or else it wouldn't be. If there were no boat, he would start drinking the whiskey that sloshed in the flask inside his coat. If the boat was there again this year... well, the Lendaways would have wine on board, just like last year.

* * *

A year ago, on Thanksgiving weekend, Larry was watching the store at the marina. A couple of boats came by, a couple of fishermen, but other than that, Larry had the whole river in front of him, and subtle layers of sound: fish moving under the

dock, a blue heron's wings whispering, a light breeze. There was a calm underneath it all, sights and sounds layered and peace woven through. Larry listened for it.

Like every Thanksgiving, everyone at the marina was gone, taking to the land where families would gather for food and football on TV. Larry told Rich he would watch the store and the gas pumps on his own. He had his own set of keys to the building and would be sitting on the docks fishing anyhow. Why not keep the "Open" sign on and make a few bucks for the marina?

Larry often looked after things on the docks on weekends and holidays. In turn, he got free moorage, except for the fifty-dollar liveaboard fee each month. In turn, he had a place to keep the boat, a place to plug in to shore power and keep warm through the night. There were showers and laundry facilities just down the dock from the store. He had to share the hot water with everyone else living at the marina, but he got up before the sun rose and the water was always warm for him. Every morning, at 6:30, he made his way to the marina store where several other men his age congregated for coffee and conversation.

He had been living on the boat for the past six years after retiring early from his long-haul driving job. He could have kept working another few years and gotten a higher pension, but he was through, especially after the truck tipped over on a bad road in the dead of winter. He sold his small home off Highway 30 in the Tualatin Mountains and moved the sailboat out of the driveway and down to the river. There was a little money coming in each month. On the water, he could make the money stretch further. There was salmon and other fish to catch for food and there was conversation every morning.

* * *

Larry aimed the bow of the rowboat toward the center of the channel. The highway had veered away to the west, and the river settled into its own sounds. Canada Geese honked in the distance, somewhere above the fog.

Then he remembered about last year's prayer. A Thanksgiving Day prayer. Shit. Surely they would ask him to say a prayer like they did last year. Maybe he should turn around and head back to the marina. He tried to think of the first few words for a Thanksgiving Day prayer. The rest would follow faithfully after the first few words. What was it? Awww, forget it. The words would come in the moment with the smell of food and the kind of silence that can only happen in a room full of people. Just like last year.

* * *

It was early morning of Thanksgiving Day the previous year when the Lendaways pulled up for fuel. The sun was out. The river was quiet. A couple of fishermen had come in for bait at first light, but the rest of the day would probably go by without Larry needing to talk to another soul. There was barely enough room for their fifty-foot Grand Banks to tie off near the fuel pumps, barely enough room on the dock for the half dozen children to stretch their legs. The boat took on almost 300 gallons of diesel.

While they were fueling up the boat, half a dozen kids were chasing one another and laughing all around him. Stuart Lendaway, the boat owner and father of the kids, invited him to join the family downstream at Coon Island for Thanksgiving dinner later in the afternoon. Larry looked up at the steam coming from the windows.

The aroma of the cooking turkey hovered amidst the stench of diesel fumes. He shook his head saying he needed to watch the fuel dock. Stuart's wife, Amy, came down, insisting, since they were probably the only boat he would see that day. The children shouted their approval. It was decided even before Larry had agreed. When Amy asked if the marina store sold any butter, Larry said "no" but offered to bring some down to the island later just before dinner. It was settled.

It took almost an hour to finish fueling up. When they were done and everyone was on board, Larry untied the bow and stern lines and passed them up to Stuart's father on deck. Larry shouted up toward the fly bridge, and heard the clunk of the engine engaging the two props. He placed both palms on the hull and leaned in, keeping the stern from brushing into the dock as Stuart turned the bow into the current. A sharp pain shot down his back and left leg, and he winced. Heavy boat.

There was a sudden movement in front of him that caught his eye, and in his surprise, he almost slipped into the river. The porthole visible between his hands framed the face of a young girl. One eye met his, wide and blazing. The other listed, wandering to the side. It was only an instant, but the face before him seemed to search through him, finding things to match its expression of concern – pity, almost.

It was only an instant, but just long enough so that the boat drifted out and he was still leaning into the hull, the boat moving away from the dock. He pushed his body away from the water as hard as he could and fell to one knee, twisting at the waist, reaching for the dock, one leg dangling in the water. He felt the weight of his body moving toward the water and then back and down as he reached his arms out over the wood. He pulled himself to his feet, one leg shedding water, pouring from

his boot, darkening the wood of the dock. When he looked up to the porthole, the face was gone. Light from an open hatch was spilling into the room beyond the window. Through the glass he caught a glimpse of a familiar shape hanging from the bulkhead. It was a crucifix: no plain Protestant cross, either. The Christ was there, head hanging to one side, knees slightly bent.

Up on deck, Stuart and several children were waving from the fly bridge. "Later-later!" one of the children called. They hadn't seen him fall. He could feel the cold water still pooled in his boot. The window in the porthole had gone dark. Stuart Lendaway turned the wheel sharply downstream and waved one last time, a flick of the hand.

Larry gritted his teeth against the cold, against the sudden pounding pain in his lower back and his knee as he waved.

Shit. Catholics.

* * *

Last year, the sun had warmed him on the half-hour row down to the island. There had been a cool breeze. This year, the air was still and cold. Ten minutes before noon, and the fog hadn't lifted yet. Larry pulled at the oars. His shoulders ached. He hadn't been out in the rowboat for a couple of weeks now. He would be feeling it more tomorrow. He would probably skip out on coffee time with the guys and spend the day in bed.

What was he thinking? What if they weren't even there? They said they came every year, but they hadn't stopped by the marina for fuel today. Last year, they told him to come again next Thanksgiving, and they would be there. Last year, lunch was

at 1:30 in the afternoon, and the food was almost ready to go, everything but the biscuits. But that was last year. Larry looked at his watch. It was 1:15. Maybe it would be too late, and they wouldn't ask him to pray for the meal again. Perhaps they didn't believe his story. Maybe that was why they didn't stop by the marina for fuel. Maybe they went the long way around to Coon Island along the main current of the Columbia River in order to avoid coming by the marina. Perhaps this was this their way of telling him to stay clear. Maybe they knew about the pearl. In his coat pocket, he could hear the pearl clicking against the flask every once in a while.

Last year, before the meal, he told the Lendaways he was a retired Catholic priest. It wasn't altogether a lie. He still had some of his books from seminary buried on the boat somewhere. It was another life, long ago.

* * *

His mother had been proud when he had signed up with the Catholic seminary. His father would have been proud too if he had not been killed in the Korean War. After seminary, he apprenticed in a parish down in Carmel, California, when the Vietnam War was really beginning to settle in. He finished his studies, and a year later, signed up as a chaplain for the U.S. Army. He never imagined he would be so close to the battlefield. Each time there was a request for him to go out into the field to be with the soldiers, he accepted. It was risky, but there were men dying out there, no one to offer them last rites or absolution. He figured that after the war, his experience would help him find a position in a big city, a big parish, an important position, close to nice restaurants and large libraries. He was twenty-eight at the time, older than most of the soldiers. They were like young boys to him, until they

began dying and offering up their confessions. Their confessions told the stories of long lives with buried pasts and unabsolved sins.

He knew all about sins. He was trained to know all about them: venial sins, mortal sins, sins of omission, sins of commission. He had an ear for what penance fit the confession of each confessor. He knew the Catholic language, that way of thinking, those categories of sin that functioned to separate him from any emotional connection to them: bestiality, incest, impure thoughts. None of that mattered in Vietnam. There wasn't much room for penance in war. The language he had studied to help articulate the state of a man's soul was of no use to him. The dying men he saw in the field used the words they could gather together as their lives bled out of them.

"Life is in the blood," Larry thought. He watched the life soak into the ground or spread out, soaking through his combat fatigues and into his knees where he knelt in the grass. His knees were dark for days, the cloth thick and moist in the humid air. Eventually, the blood would dry and flake away.

As the life flowed away, the men told the worst of their lives. In those last moments, their lives were defined by their worst acts. Often there was not enough time for absolution, no ray of hope for these boys as their lives spilled away on foreign soil. Mostly they confessed sins committed back home, burdens they carried all the way here only to lay them down in the jungle, in the grass, in the rice paddies: cousins they slept with, black men they had killed, bodies hidden, what they did to farm animals, things they had stolen. Long lists of violation and violence poured out as their lives spilled out onto the ground.

Violence poured into Larry's ears, and with his eyes, he saw the blood - his own clothing filling up with the blood of others. He began to doubt his calling, his language for understanding these things. The words he could think to offer were like an empty structure, a hollow frame that no longer held any meaning. The peace he used to know and share with others was gone, or buried, like a small, dry grain of sand deep inside his chest. The horror poured in and spilled over, hardening over him like a shell.

If the men confessed about anything they had done while in Vietnam it usually had to do with accidents. Once a week, a young, dying man would tell him about killing one of their own. Not many of these got reported. Larry didn't keep a count. He didn't listen for names. He heard an officer talking one night in the mess tent about his father's experience in World War 2. He heard that some estimates attributed one out of three deaths in that war to friendly fire. Friendly fire. And now Americans were coming over to a small country in Asia to kill more Americans. Americans told Larry about it as they lay dying. Larry listened and doled out forgiveness to those who lived long enough to receive it.

One boy had killed a fellow soldier in the crossfire and had lied about it. The boy had then tried to take his own life in the midst of the battle but had flinched and taken out the soldier standing next to him. He lied about that too. Some of the guilty ones ventured out into the open during a firefight, the shame heavy on their backs. The men called them suicide runs. Those who lived to talk to Larry often told him why they had done it.

One scorching hot day, at the edge of a firefight, a soldier spoke to him from the ground. The soldier's left arm and part of his left leg were gone. The medic hadn't even bothered with tourniquets. The chopper had come for the others and had gone. The life came pulsing out where the elbow should have been as Larry knelt and listened. The boy was shaking. The boy spoke with the words he could find. Where the words would not come, he spoke to Larry with his eyes. Larry didn't look away, and he heard it all.

"Bless me, Father. Listen. I killed one of our own. A guy from another platoon. They weren't supposed to be there. Thought he was a gook. Came up from behind. With a knife. He didn't hear me coming. I took his water, a chocolate bar, a picture of his woman. I took the picture. It's in my pocket here." The boy had stopped trembling and his gaze struck Larry like a fist so that he could barely breathe. "I have impure thoughts about the woman in the picture, Father. And I killed her husband. I keep killing him in my head and fucking his wife. It seems right to kill him and then keep killing him. I drink his water. I eat his chocolate. I fuck his wife. Why do I want to keep taking his life away? She is so beautiful. Please take the picture. Don't let me die with it."

Larry reached into the boy's clothing and removed several letters and the photograph. She was smiling, her hands loose at her side. He turned back to the boy. The eyes were still open but he was gone.

Larry left the battlefield in the next chopper, keeping close to the body. As they flew over a stretch of hills, he tossed the picture out the door. For the dying, there is no time for penance, or sometimes, even last rites. Larry said prayers for the

boy long after he was gone, long after the war was over. After that day, he knew he was finished. Part of him was dead now or buried alive somehow. He couldn't even grieve the loss of the part of himself that was gone. How could this happen? Perhaps he had gotten too close, cared too much for these men. He couldn't keep to the structure of the sacraments in the chaos of war. If the sacraments were empty here, if they couldn't work here, how could they work anywhere else? At least, that was how he began to understand it. Confessions continued, pouring out to him, running over, pooling at his feet and hardening on his skin in layers over time.

He never went back to church after the war was over. He just turned away and didn't look back. Not from God, really. In some ways, that calm presence back of all things still remained. He tried to doubt God the way he had heard others do so many times, but he could not. Even though that calm presence no longer seemed to fill him or the words of the religion he had once believed in, it still seemed to fill other things in other ways. The best Larry could manage was to remain aloof to that hovering presence outside of himself, behind the words, behind the sacraments, behind blood flowing into the ground. Behind all the talk, there was something there, a kind of calm, like the calm at the end of the song on the radio just before the next one comes on and you realize it has been there all along, hovering around the music, filling it.

Even now, he could see it, even though he couldn't feel it: that calm behind things and sometimes in them. Sitting, watching the river, Larry could see it in the current passing by, carrying life below the surface. There was stillness there, but even that couldn't get to him. Nobody's fault, really. It was enough to see it, to sit

on the edge of a dock in its presence knowing it was there. He didn't need the words of prayers and sacraments anymore to try and get at it, exert authority over it. Like trying to catch air with a butterfly net, he figured.

After the war, Larry went home, got married, and started driving semi-trailers. His only connection to other people was his wife and the other drivers at truck stops each morning. He chose long hauls and was away from home for weeks at a time. His wife left him several years after the war ended. Larry drove and drove and drove, listening to the radio stations that faded in and out. Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Emmylou Harris. They could sing out their woes, and something like peace would draw near, right there in the cab with him; it was sometimes carried in with a song, but rarely. Mostly, it was only the frank sadness of the music or static buzzing through the speakers as he steered the truck down roads for days and nights and years and miles.

* * *

Larry stopped rowing and listened again to the water passing under the boat. He couldn't concentrate. The current was playing with him. He would never make it in time. They probably weren't even there. His arms were stiff. He was thirsty, really thirsty. Why the hell hadn't he brought any drinking water along?

He didn't drink much water these days. Last year, he wasn't reaching for the whiskey until about noon. Now, he started his days pouring a little into his coffee when he met with the other men in the marina store. He turned to the side, away from the men, tipping the flask over his paper cup. Norm and Bill must have known but

said nothing, not wanting any cracks to develop in their morning gatherings. They would all turn to look out over the river and carry on the conversation.

Last year, Thanksgiving Day, after the meal, Larry pulled the whiskey flask out of his pocket and drank as he made the trip home from Coon Island. He had gone down there sober. This year, he figured he would do the same.

* * *

After the Lendaways pulled away from the dock the previous year, Larry went back to the sailboat and found some dry socks and shoes. He returned to the store and sat in his green plastic chair gazing over the water, wondering what to do. He tried breathing slowly, long, even breaths. The morning had started with a quietness all around him. Peace hanging in the air. The Lendaways had gone and taken it all away.

He thought about biscuits and turkey and gravy. The inboard engine on his sailboat wasn't running yet and it would take half an hour to get to the island downstream in the twelve-foot rowboat he used for daily exercise. His back was in bad shape today. All those years behind the wheel driving truck. No, it went back further than that, back to the war. He figured finally that he couldn't just sit there where nothing was happening when the universe was unfolding itself downstream at Coon Island. It was Thanksgiving for Christ's sake. He hadn't had a big Thanksgiving meal in ten years.

He arrived ten minutes early and pulled two cubes of butter wrapped in silver foil out of his jacket pocket. Amy took them with a nod. Larry marveled at the spacious cabin; it was always much bigger inside a boat than seemed possible looking at it from the outside. Larry's eyes scanned the clutch of children and aunts and

uncles and grandparents, looking for the girl. Cliff, Stuart's father, handed Larry a wineglass and asked if he drank. Larry nodded. He could feel the heavy lump of the whiskey flask in his jacket. When Cliff asked where he had worked over the years, Larry saw the girl coming up the steps from below and just blurted it out: that he was a Catholic priest, that he had recently retired, that his wife was gone, died a year ago, that he came down here to the river to live the contemplative life that had eluded him during those busy years at the different parishes along the west coast. When Cliff asked, he made up the names of several small towns in California and in Oregon. No, Cliff hadn't heard of them.

Now that they had a priest in their midst, they were thrilled. Stuart smiled and Amy insisted that Larry say the prayer before they ate. "Stu knew there was something about you back at the fuel dock, father...." She paused.

"Father Palmer," said Larry.

"Father Palmer." She put her hand on his shoulder, guiding him to a place at the head of the table. He removed his jacket and hung it lightly over the back of his chair.

When the meal was ready and everyone had gathered, they all looked at Larry, smiling. The girl's mouth frowned, one eye on him. She crossed herself, and everyone else seemed to follow her suggestion. The rustle of clothing. The boat shifting - still settling from the collective movement toward the center of the vessel. Larry paused, said the words, his eyes open, watching the red wine move in the glass on the table in front of him. He glanced up. The girl's eyes were closed, her hands folded.

He spoke the prayer, pulling the words up slowly as if from a deep well.

She couldn't have been more than eight or nine. During the meal, she piled on potatoes and dressing, passing all the others along without taking anything. She paused between bites and looked at Larry. There was no mistaking it now; she was staring across the table at him. She continued to fill her plate with mashed potatoes. Always, one of those eyes seemed to focus on him until he could not tell which one was the good one.

When his plate was empty, Amy offered Larry second helpings. The potatoes came around to him, and when he looked into the nearly empty bowl, he saw a small fork resting next to the serving spoon. He lifted out the fork and held it up, looking across to the girl.

"Did someone lose a fork?"

She got up and walked around the table until she stood beside Larry, her face questioning. He turned to face her. She held out her hand. He turned the fork in his hand, placing the handle into hers. There were small chunks of potato on the handle. She had the fork, but she wasn't moving.

"Gracie, why don't you thank Father Palmer?" called Amy from across the table.

The girl didn't move.

Larry reached for his wineglass. As he turned, the flask of whiskey hanging in the jacket pocket behind him brushed heavily against his leg. Her gaze shifted down to the coat and then back to his face, her one good eye burning through him. Larry excused himself and asked where the bathroom was.

Larry made his way down a short set of steps toward the stern and off to the left, entering the bathroom and shutting the door with a soft click. He stared into the mirror, wine on his breath, in his blood, filling him like an old memory. He relieved himself and stared some more into the mirror. Why had he come here? The wine was nice. He could accept another glass, if offered. His third, and then he would stop and leave soon after. He twisted the outflow valve on the toilet, pumped it clean and turned to face the mirror with both hands on the counter beside the sink. He smiled widely at his reflection. The whine of an outboard engine outside filled the small room with its soft hum and then faded off down stream. Fishermen. The sound rang clear in the belly of the boat, the hull receiving the vibrations carried along in the water. The air around him seemed to shudder, the walls of the small room humming, the counter slightly buzzing under his hands.

A few more stories, a few more questions to answer and then he could take his leave, back to the marina, to tend to things. He would need to be careful, though. That girl. She knew. He might say anything under her gaze. But she was just a girl, some kind of half-wit and curious, that was all. He bent to wash his hands and the boat rocked as the wake from the passing fishing vessel finally made its way to their side of the river. A movement on the floor caught his eye. Something small rolled down at his feet. He picked it up. It was a tiny pearl, round and smooth. There was a small pinprick of a hole going through the center. It must have fallen off a necklace, and been forgotten. A keepsake, then. Something to remember the day by. These people would more likely buy a new pearl before stooping to look for a lost one. Larry dropped it into his pocket where it clinked against the flask, a full, comforting,

metallic sound. He winked at his reflection in the mirror and leaned in to whisper. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned." He opened the door and made his way back toward the table.

Half an hour later, Larry was pulling away from the dock, waving up at Stuart and Amy and the children. They chimed like a chorus: "Come back next year!" They waved and then hurried back into the cabin. All of them except the girl. Larry gazed up at her. She waved to him, her expression grim, or sad, he couldn't quite tell. He tried to work his face into a smile. The sun was shining high in the sky. There seemed to be light pouring from her. A string of pearls hung loosely around her neck and caught the light, glowing slightly. The pearls were evenly spaced, except for on one side so that the necklace seemed to hang out of balance. Larry looked down and went to work on the oars.

Her voice came down to him, quiet, but clear: "Come back next year, Father."

Larry looked up at the girl just as Amy called her name from inside. She turned and stumbled through the door. Larry waited until the Grand Banks was a good ways off and pulled out the flask, sipping a little at a time but with few breaks between.

* * *

The river went around its bend on his way downstream. The fog was too thick to see anything.

Would they even remember him this year? It's not like they were his family. He hadn't even been with them that long. How embarrassing, borrowing a family for one day a year - renting them for the price of half-truths from his own past. And then

there was the pearl. It was stupid, really, but he had to return the pearl, pull it out of his pocket and place it on the floor in the bathroom as if it had never been gone. The pearl, on loan for the year. He would put it back and then leave quickly. He would say that he needed to get back to the marina, that he needed to make it quick this year. Well, maybe after a piece of pie. If there was any pie. If they were even there this year. One piece of pie to savor while he answered their questions with stories about being a chaplain in Nam. Yes. That was it: he could tell them the truth this time, the truth about his time in California and then the war. Steer the conversation that way. No need to talk about the recent past when there were whole rivers of truth further back, about the war. The girl had told him to come back. She had stayed out on deck last year in order to tell him. Why did she do that?

Larry turned to look downstream over his shoulder. Through the fog he could see the dark form of Coon Island and the Lendaways' boat tied to the dock nearby.

Every year, just like they said. He tried again to remember the first words of the Thanksgiving blessing but couldn't. They would ask him to pray. His heart was beating fast, now. He would never remember the words. They would know. Shit. He let go the oar on the starboard side and brought the silver flask from his coat pocket, fumbling quickly with the lid. He took a long pull on the whiskey, tipping his head back until he almost lost his balance. He paused and then lifted his arm, pointing the mouth of the flask up to the sky somewhere beyond the mist.

"Thanks." Larry smiled. "Hey, there's a goddamn prayer for you."

The fog seemed to push the sound of his voice back into the boat. The oar on the port side began to slide through the lock and into the water. Larry barely got the

flask closed up again before he had to grab at the oar when he saw it slipping away. Just in time.

The Lendaway's boat was getting closer. He risked one last drink. The Grand Banks seemed quiet. The cabin windows glowed dimly with the light coming from inside.

Even when he had pulled up to the dock, Larry couldn't hear any noise coming from the boat. No children. No sound of clinking dishes. Nothing. He wrapped the painter around a dock cleat and waited. What if they didn't even remember him? Gracie. What if Gracie knew about the pearl? Maybe that's why she asked him to come back. No, that was ridiculous.

He would put the pearl in the bathroom and have some pie and leave and never come back. This wasn't his family. No use pretending to himself that he wasn't using this family in order to hold the loneliness at bay. This would be it, then. No more Thanksgivings. Larry took one last pull at the whiskey and stepped confidently from his rowboat onto the dock. At least now he wouldn't have to wait the next year out dreading the clatter and noise of the children, the exhaustion of carefully calculated answers to easy questions, the burden of social graces, smiles, laughter, forced humor, pretending to enjoy his priestly role. No more dread and longing at the same time for these people, these Catholics.

He reached the foot of the retractable steps and rapped two knuckles on the hull. Ten seconds later, the small face of a dog peered through the railing above. A toy poodle, its fluffy ears tied with ribbons. For Christ's sake, now they'd gone and

picked up a ridiculous little dog for their big boat. A few seconds later, he saw another face. It was Stuart.

Silence for a brief moment.

"Is that you, Father?"

"I was just out for some exercise in the rowboat. Looks like you were telling the truth. Every year down here, huh?"

"Come on up. We were just about to serve up dessert but there's still plenty of other food. It's all plenty warm. Come on up."

"No, I'm just out and about. I don't want to intrude. I thought I would stop in and just say hello."

"No, please, come up for something to eat. I was hoping you would make it." Stuart extended his hand, and Larry took it, a firm grip helping him up the gap between the dock and the first step.

Larry made his way up the stairs and onboard. Hoping he would make it? What might he mean by that? Larry felt in his coat pocket for the pearl, hoping to transfer it to his trouser pocket before he removed his coat inside. He moved his hand around the flask in the pocket, feeling for it but couldn't get to it before he stepped up to the main cabin door where Amy stood. The dog yapped behind him. Amy greeted him, her face smiling, though it was a weary smile, the kind of smile where the mouth grins but the eyes carry only sadness-or was it pity? What was it, exactly?

"I didn't bring any butter this time. I hope you weren't counting on me for butter."

"Don't you worry, Father. We have plenty."

She came in close and wrapped her arms around him. He staggered a little and then accepted the embrace, folding her in his arms. As he did so, he held his breath, partly from fear that she might smell the whiskey, partly to hold down the sudden sadness that welled in him. They parted, and Amy looked into his eyes, thanking him for coming. Another one of those smiles came over her face. What was this? She must smell the whiskey.

Stuart's parents were still at the table, and the aunts and uncles and most of the children. All their eyes were on him, gazes filled with concern, or wonder, Larry couldn't tell. Two of the children came over and gazed up at him, smiling but saying nothing. He placed both his hands on their heads. They tugged at his sleeves and then skittered off to their spots at the table. Most of the plates were finished off, the utensils resting on them haphazardly. Some of the adults were still eating.

They all greeted him and he shook a few hands. Stuart guided him to the one empty chair, the one closest to the cabin door on the port side. Conversation began and the adults wanted to know how Larry was, how was the fishing this past season, how was the marina, any big news from the past year?

Amy offered to dish him up some food, asking him what he wanted. Larry waved his hand in the air and told her to surprise him.

Something was still a bit off. The kids weren't as loud, or something. Maybe it was the fog and the dull, gray light coming through the windows. Maybe it was the whiskey. They hadn't offered him any wine yet. Maybe they knew about the pearl. Where was Gracie? Larry gazed around the table looking for her. Stuart's father, Cliff got up and offered to take Larry's coat. Larry said, No, that he wouldn't stay

long, that he would just hang the coat over the back of his chair. He started to remove it, feeling in the pocket again for the pearl, but it was not there. It was gone. His heart began to beat wildly. Where was it? Where was she? Something brushed up against his leg and he jumped. When he gazed under the table, there was the little dog face, looking up at him. The stupid, cute little face.

Amy brought in the plate of food, and he started in on the potatoes. One of the young boys asked if he was going to pray for the food before he ate it, and the room went silent. Amy shushed the boy.

Larry looked down at his fork. "No, he's right. I should pray."

Amy sat down next to Stuart. "Will you pray for us all? For all our food I mean?"

Stuart was gazing at the table.

"Sure, I can do that. Is everyone here? Anybody missing?"

Now everyone looked at the table. The boat rocked slightly in the water. The dock lines stretched and groaned.

One of the girls, the youngest, turned to look at Larry.

"Gracie's with the angels. She is flying with them and with Jesus."

The dog brushed against Larry's leg again, and he bumped his arm into a glass of water beside him at the table. The water poured into his lap. The dog barked from under the table, a small, distant yap. Several people ran to the kitchen and to the closet down the hall for towels. When Larry stood up, he could feel the water soaking through his trousers and rolling down his legs.

Amy apologized. Stuart apologized. The dog barked again, and Larry looked down to see it come out from under the table, its legs shivering, drops of water hanging in its fur. Now, for the first time, he noticed that the dog was wearing a life jacket; there was padding on both sides and a handle protruding upward from its back. It looked like a large rat in a space suit. Larry could hardly believe what he was doing as he reached down and grabbed at the handle, pulling the animal up easily before his face. The beady eyes stared at him. Fear in those eyes. There was a slight tremor in the handle. Larry laughed, a soft, yelping sound in his throat. Then he saw that everyone was looking at him. Cliff had narrowed his gaze, glaring. Larry set the dog down, one-handed, and rubbed at an eye. His head was pounding. His cheeks reddened.

"You know, it's funny. At the fuel dock, the bigger the boats that come in, the smaller the dogs." Larry kept rubbing his eye. He couldn't believe the words that were coming out of his mouth. He hadn't really said them, had he? He rubbed at the other eye.

"Actually, I had a beagle once, a long time ago. Little dog. We used to live up in the hills. That dog kept me alive, I tell you. He used to catch cottontails and he would eat off 'em. It was winter, and he would go out and come back with a cottontail, and we would both eat off 'em and I tell you that dog was unconditional." He paused. "Shit. I don't know what I'm saying."

Larry put both hands over his face and stood there for a moment listening to everyone's silence until the young boy spoke up again.

"Father Palmer ate rabbits?"

Larry reached for his coat and headed for the door. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said as he pulled his arms through the sleeves, "and sorry for butting in on your grieving."

Stuart grabbed him by the arm and met his gaze. "No Larry, please. Don't go. It's OK. Don't go." There were tears in Stuart's eyes, his face pleading. Amy's voice echoed her husband's. Some of the children chimed in: "No, don't go." "Where is he going?" "Did he eat rabbits?"

Cliff was still glaring.

Stuart reached out and held Larry's forearm. "We need you to be here. Please come back to the table."

Larry shook his arm lightly free, opened the door and stepped through, speaking back over his shoulder: "Thank you for your hospitality. I'm so sorry." He closed the door behind him and ran down the steps, losing his balance as he stepped down the last one. He fell to one knee on the dock and winced but was up again quickly, moving to his rowboat, untying the painter and stepping in, scrambling for the oars. The skin was broken on his knee under the trousers and the blood beaded through the cloth. He pulled at the oars and aimed the bow upstream, watching the island and boat fade into the mist. He rowed fiercely for a minute and then pulled the flask from his pocket and worked several gulps down. The throbbing in his knee subsided a few moments later. He went back to the oars.

Just before the Grand Banks faded away, he saw a dark form moving on deck, lowering a small boat down into the water from the stern-crane arm. Someone was coming after him.

Then the Grand Banks was lost in the fog, but he could hear the sputter of an outboard engine carrying over the smooth surface of the water as someone pulled on the starter rope to get it going. Larry aimed the rowboat toward the island shore. The outboard engine turned over in the distance. Larry pulled hard, and the bottom of the rowboat hissed into the sand near the grassy bank as the sound of the engine hummed its way upstream. Larry leaned back and waited, drinking whiskey.

* * *

Fog floated by, and time. Larry thought of Gracie while he waited, the quiet mist floating all around him until he felt he had become a part of it. His breath came slowly. His mind became still and his heart felt full in the presence of the river, the fog, the warm flask in his hand. The hum of the small engine came and went, up and down the river. Persistent. Finally, Larry saw the skiff passing close to his shore. It was Stuart. Larry felt a kind of hope moving inside him. He smiled. Strange. A sensation he hadn't felt since he was a boy: he wanted to be found. When he saw that Stuart was going to pass by, unable to see him, he waved wildly with both arms and then shouted out.

"Stu!"

The engine died down, and the skiff aimed its bow toward Larry. Stuart's grim expression materialized from out of the mist. The engine chugged to a stop and their boats met with a bump.

"You're not a priest, are you? At least not now."

"No, not any more."

"But you used to be, didn't you?"

"A lifetime ago. Before Vietnam."

"Then I have something to ask you."

Larry leaned forward and offered the flask to Stuart who unscrewed the cap and took a quick sip. He looked into Larry's eyes and smiled sheepishly. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

Stuart took one more drink and passed the flask back over.

Larry ran his fingers through his hair. "Well, that doesn't sound like a question to me. Why don't you take your 'bless me, father' on downstream to the next drunk priest you find along the shore?" He said this grinning, a big, stupid grin. He tried to bite his cheek, but it didn't stop, so he went on grinning. Stuart smiled back.

"No, I'd like to talk to this one here. Anyway, I don't have a priest anymore. And Gracie would have wanted it to be you." Both their smiles faded. "She liked you. She was always asking if you would be coming for Thanksgiving again. I don't go to mass anymore. Not in the last few months anyway, since she's been gone."

"What happened?"

Stuart's voice wavered. "She had a tumor in her brain. We could have caught it a couple of years ago if we had known. The doctor gave her a couple of weeks to live, and she lasted four months."

Larry shifted his weight, straightening his leg out. The little water in the bottom of the boat flowed to starboard. Larry looked down, and there was the pearl in a puddle of brownish river water. He picked it up, holding it out to Stuart between his thumb and forefinger.

"I need to give this back to you. I found it last year. I think it was Gracie's. I was wrong to take it."

Stuart looked confused. He shook his head. "No, I think it's yours. Gracie wanted you to have this." Stuart reached into a coat pocket and pulled out a necklace of tiny pearls, six of them fixed at intervals around the thin chain. Larry saw again the gap in the string near the tiny clasp. "She said to make sure Father Palmer got this. She was adamant about it."

Larry reached for the necklace and put it in his pocket. He offered the flask to Stuart. "You want the last bit?"

Stuart shook his head.

Larry straightened his back, stretching a little. The pain in his knee was only a dull numbness. "So, what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Well, it wasn't a question, I guess." The mist floated between them; a thin veil. "I'll start over. Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

Larry looked him in the eyes. "Technically, I can't do this anymore, you know."

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned," Stuart repeated, lowering his head as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

The words poured out and Larry listened. Stuart had slept with another woman, and soon after, the family found out about Gracie's cancer. Stuart was carrying the guilt of the affair and blaming himself for his daughter's death. His sin had killed her in the crossfire. God's punishment to get his attention.

Did Amy know? No, not yet. Stuart promised to tell her. No penance. Just go tell Amy. Larry offered him absolution.

Once he and Stuart were speaking the words, it was as if water was flowing back through part of him that had been long dry and forgotten. He said the words and could feel something like peace pouring and spilling over. It was like an ache in his chest. Under the layer of dullness from the whiskey, under the layers of sound along the river, the fog, the words of the sacrament, something stirred inside him: a grain of hope for himself, or the longing for that hope – he couldn't tell the difference.

Larry told Stuart to "go in peace," and that's what he did; they shook hands and headed in opposite directions on the river.

* * *

By the time they parted ways, and Larry was rowing back upstream, the fog was lifting a little. There were clouds above the fog. Larry could see some color beyond the clouds. There was light up there somewhere.

Larry could see the marina up ahead, now that the fog was lifting slightly. He paused in his rowing and lifted the flask to his lips, the last bit of whiskey burning dimly on the way down. Pulling the necklace out of his pocket, he lowered it into the mouth of the flask. Then he took the one pearl and held it between thumb and forefinger. He said a prayer out loud for Gracie and let the pearl drop into the flask with a clink. Then he screwed the lid down tight, put the flask into his pocket and reached for the oars.

Invoking the Unseen

I.

I slid the glass door open and stepped into the marina store. The air hung in the room, thick and musky, the scent of booze and tobacco. Larry was sitting on the stool at the far end of the counter over by the coffee maker, alone. It was morning, Monday; a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving and a couple of weeks after Edmo had set sail. I made my way over to my desk, shoving my bag into the cupboard below the candy display, flipping the computer on and leaning into the counter while the machine booted up. The top of the thick, glass counter was sticky. The sun shone through the windows and the sliding glass door on the river side of the building, the thick glass of the counter top reflecting the light, an illuminated surface clouded with the oil from many hand prints, elbows and arms, the imprints of skin moist with sunscreen, sweat, and fish slime drying under the drops of spilled beer. The counter told the stories of the weekend: who had been up to what when they came into the store for their various reasons. I reached for the cloth and the spray bottle under the till counter, then changed my mind, and unlocked the till drawer, to count the weekend cash and checks instead. I'd leave the counter to speak the smeared shapes of stories for now. I could wipe them away later.

The fan spun slowly above Larry, barely rustling the top edge of his newspaper. He had started hanging around the office more the past couple of weeks. When Rich was gone for the day, Larry would sometimes sit in the blue, high-backed leather chair at the other desk, but mostly, he sat in a stool at the counter, leaning it forward onto its two front legs. It looked like a precarious arrangement to me, but the

stool never slipped away, and Larry's sense of balance never seemed to waver, even when speedboats went by, drawing up the water into a rolling wake beneath us. When someone came into the store, Larry looked up over the top of the magazine or newspaper he was reading to find the shape of the person reflected in the glass of a framed map hanging on the wall behind Rich's desk. He would lower the paper and talk, or he would keep reading. Usually, he kept reading.

When I had finished adding up the weekend earnings, I walked to the end of the counter to check on the coffee maker, clearing my throat. Larry turned a page.

"Any word?" I asked.

He looked at me over the paper. "Word about what?"

"Any word from Edmo over the weekend?"

Larry balanced the newspaper in one hand and picked up two envelopes from a stack of mail on the counter beside him, handing them to me. "Nothing *from* Edmo. Just this mail *for* him. Doctor bills or something." Larry glanced again over the classifieds, folded the newspaper and placed it on top of the pile of mail. "I found them when I was sorting through the business mail yesterday." I held the envelopes for a moment. Larry folded his arms and breathed deeply, his eyes still on the newspaper.

They both had the same return address; a doctor's office in Portland.

Larry continued to stare down at the paper as I spoke.

"It doesn't seem right to mark them 'return to sender' when he might call to say 'hi' or let us know where he is." I turned and put the envelopes on the top shelf

of the bookcase beside my desk. "Did he tell you about that trip he made to the doctor before he left?"

"Only that he was going."

I picked up the stack of mail and started flipping through it. Larry shifted in his seat like he was getting ready to leave. He paused when I spoke again.

"Did you know him very well?"

"Edmo? Was it possible not to know him very well?"

Larry tipped his head back, drinking the last of his coffee, lightly tapping the bottom of the paper cup with his small finger. "I don't know, Chad. Maybe not. Maybe I didn't know him. Maybe nobody did. Ask Norm about Edmo. He remembers more."

With his hands on the counter, he leaned forward onto his feet and let the stool drop back onto its four legs with a thud. "Well, I need to get out there before the fish stop biting." He nodded at me and turned to go. The balance he was able to maintain while leaning on the stool seemed to slowly drain out of him as he swayed toward the door. I hollered after him to go ahead and keep the door open and then waited until he was gone before I reached up and pulled the gold chain hanging from the ceiling fan to make it spin faster. I took Edmo's envelopes down off the shelf and held them up to the light. Nothing. Just bills, probably.

I wasn't sure what to believe about Edmo, whether it was something he said, or something someone else said about him. In the mornings since Edmo left, Norm had told a few stories about him, as if to fill the absence with a few of Edmo's claims, just little things about him, at first. About the time Edmo started bringing dead

cottonwood branches onto his boat at night so that the thieving beaver would have something to take for its dam-making supplies besides his clothes and other belongings. About how, for some reason, bird shit seemed to land on all the boats in the marina except his. About how palm readers couldn't read his fortune since he had several extra strange lifelines. About his dreams of dams bursting up along the Columbia, and the salmon returning like they used to. Edmo's stories made everyone else's more believable.

I set the stacks of mail down on my desk amongst last week's files. Through the open door, a light breeze brought cooler air into the room and with it, the sharp scent of bacon frying on Larry's boat just around the corner. Underneath the scent of bacon, there was the smell of wet earth from the low tide. I reached again for the bottle of glass cleaner, thinking about Edmo while I wiped clear patches into the foggy glass.

II.

Strange things always seemed to happen to Edmo. He caught fish when no one else could. He never caught colds or the flu even when everyone else caught them. For a guy who kept his activities down mostly to watching TV and fishing and drinking whisky, he seemed to attract an unnatural number of supernatural occurrences. He said it was because he paid attention to what there was to see on the river and recognized the interconnectedness of all things. I try to picture what his days were like from what I have heard, from what he told me in the short time I knew

him. He used to be a person living in the world, after all, apart from what he has become now that he is gone and now that stories and exaggerations are reshaping him into a kind of holy fool. The regular, everyday stuff never gets emphasized. You'd think he never lived and breathed the way people talk about him.

"I usually cry in the morning," he told me once. I try to imagine it, how it must have gone:

Edmo awakens to the sound of Norm's skiff puttering by on its morning rounds. He waits until the sound has faded and then pushes the blankets to the end of the bed. The empty bottles on the floor bring the tears to his eyes. Trying to ignore the mess of unwashed clothes and the bottles, Edmo reaches for his bible. It is on the shelf behind the kitchen table, next to the dream catcher and an old peace pipe. The leather cover of the bible, once black, is now a silvery gray. He has kept it since sixth grade, a gift from the Indian boarding school some 60 years ago, now. The cover wore itself off the text some time ago, but Edmo continued to stick it all back together with duct tape. Over the years, the book has accumulated a number of layers of new tape and now the whole cover is mummified somewhere underneath the silver strips. The years go by, the tape hardens and dries, and then begins to fray at the edges. Edmo reaches for a new roll of tape and carefully winds it around the spine. One morning, he surveys his handiwork only to discover that he has wrapped up the bible entirely, wound the tape all the way around the spine as well as around the opening side. He looks around for a knife sharp enough to make the three cuts that will let him inside. He lets the pages fall where they will and points randomly. Edmo lights a cigarette and reads.

"My breath is offensive to my wife, And I am repulsive to the children of my own body" (Holy Bible NKJ, Job 19. 17).

No, the wife and children part doesn't quite fit. His finger searches across to the facing page and finds another: THE ONE.

"Though evil is sweet in his mouth, And he hides it under his tongue, Though he spares it and does not forsake it, But still keeps it in his mouth, Yet his food in his stomach turns sour; It becomes cobra venom within him....He will not see the streams, The rivers flowing with honey and cream" (Holy Bible NKJ, Job 20. 12-17).

The finger stops. He looks out over the water, nodding his head and closing the book.

One morning, Edmo wakes up in the shadow of an angel perching on the stern pulpit of his sailboat. A large, plastic angel. He had seen it floating along the night before. He often found things in the river at night or during the day, fishing. A bird's nest. An unopened six pack of beer. A bobber clamped to a ring of keys. Several times, Edmo pulled Paul out of the water when he floated by. Paul drank more than anyone at the marina and sometimes slipped in when he tried to relieve himself in the water at night. The night Edmo saw the angel floating by, he had been praying for some kind of sign, and there it was, bright white in the dark water under the moon. It practically brushed by his feet where they dangled in the current. All he needed to do was to reach out and snag it by the head with his fish net. It was several feet tall, hollow, made of thick plastic. If ever there was a sign for him, this must be it. What did it mean? Or did that matter? It was like a blank postcard arriving in the mail. It

was an answer, evidence that someone up there was watching and listening. The angel was heavy, a bucket's-worth of water sloshing around inside.

It was still late, but Edmo worked quietly, mounting the angel onto the stern of his boat so that it stood facing the river. Edmo swore the angel was glowing slightly when he turned off the lamp he had used while he bolted the statue to the fiberglass on the stern. It was female, the wings rising above her head and draping down around her body, almost blending into the robes that pooled around her feet. Her expression was downcast, smiling slightly, savoring some truth or pondering some knowledge. Edmo recognized eventually that it was a statue of the Virgin Mary with wings. Probably, whatever production company that constructed this angel used the same casting for a Mary statue. Edmo could see the white bead of plastic that lined the base of the wings where they had been attached. An angel, but not an angel. Like him: an Indian, but a special kind of Indian.

When he was done working, he opened the bible to a familiar passage:

> *"While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal"* (Holy Bible NKJ, 2 Cor. 4. 18).

Usually, after his morning scripture reading, Edmo makes his way down to the fuel dock, where Norm or Larry, or both, sit waiting. They get there first, letting themselves into the store and throwing the switch on the coffee maker. By the time Edmo gets there, the coffee is ready.

It takes until late afternoon before Edmo can bring himself to eat anything, usually several packs of M&Ms from the fuel dock. Eating makes him thirsty. He drives his large, white van to the liquor store and returns with one bottle. He used to throw out the left-over booze as soon as he woke up in the morning as part of his ritual of morning repentance, but he has taken to buying bottles big enough to do the job and small enough to finish off before the morning comes.

* * *

But that is just my attempt to imagine how Edmo's mornings might have been, piecing things together from what Norm and others have said and the little I remember about Edmo's daily tears, his duct-taped bible, the passages he would quote sometimes, the angel he found, and the M&Ms I sold him every day. Others might tell it differently. Edmo himself might not have mentioned the M&Ms or the duct tape but he would probably have remembered to repeat the bible verses.

III.

Norm gets the historical points of Edmo's life as clearly as he can, making sure we know when he's only guessing. Edmo's real name, Norm said, was Edward Morris. People had called him Edmo for so many years, he no longer thought much about his first or last name. Edmo wasn't even sure what his middle name was anymore. "William" or "Stephen" or something. Hard to imagine a life where you don't know your middle name.

Edmo was practically an Indian. There was Indian in his blood, three or four generations distant. Not North American Indian blood, though - eastern Indian. Edmo had dark hair and brown, weathered skin from a life lived mostly outdoors. His father looked Native too, so much so that the family had moved in the 1950s from Portland out to a small village near Celilo Falls in order to embrace the Native likeness that drew narrowed gazes from the customers at the store where his father worked. When Edmo was very young, his father had a job in a music shop downtown, making repairs and tuning up the instruments that came through. His father had two skills: fixing things and fishing. The fishing wasn't so good in Portland, so they went where both skills might be useful.

Norm said he probably ran across Edmo out there on the river when Edmo was still a boy. Before the dam went in, everyone used to drive out to buy fish and watch the Indians suspended out over the churning water on their wood platforms. Once, late at night, when he was very young, Norm's father took him to fish the falls. How they were going to haul all those fish they caught up to the truck, Norm wasn't sure. Someone must have seen them out on the rocks, fishing on Native land, because there were soon a dozen dark forms heading their way. His dad yelled to him over the roar of the falls to drop all the fish and run. Norm told us that he held on to one fish and scrambled over the rocks back to the truck under the star-lit sky, not daring to look back, the forty-pound salmon still twitching in his arms.

* * *

From around the age of 10, Edmo had grown up among the Yakama Indians who lived on the fringes of Celilo village. Eventually, the Yakama tribe allowed his

family access to a couple of fishing spots near the falls. Edmo lived the life of a northwest Indian. He went to a boarding school with the other kids, fished the falls at Celilo, and then joined the American Indian movement in the 60s. Other natives looked twice at him when they first met him, at his dark hair, his large, brown eyes. When they asked about his tribal affiliations, he said that he was the only member of his own tribe, the last of an unregistered, northwest river clan. They shrugged and called him Edmo.

Tribal relations were contentious in light of fishing rights along the river. How Edmo and his family found a way to fish at Celilo, Norm wasn't sure. Perhaps they paid for the right, or more likely, if the rest of the family was anything like Edmo, they got under people's skin. Maybe they did it to get Edmo and his family to shut up about strange visions of an Indian Jesus, or something.

Edmo told Norm that he used to have a brother. His father and brother both drowned fishing in the falls at Celilo and his mother drowned in her grief. When the brother fell in, his father had jumped in after him, out of anger, despair, or the impulse to save his son, no one ever found out. Further downstream, someone caught the father's body in a net, but the life was gone from him. Two weeks later, the construction of The Dalles Dam was completed. Edmo's mother died the same week the dam closed its doors on the river. His father was the last person to be buried on the sacred grounds before they were submerged. They never found the brother. The body must have been caught under the rocks somewhere. Edmo said he liked to think about his brother, still down there somewhere, or what was left of him, his bones resting on the rocks under the soft layer of silt.

Edmo spent months watching the dam go up, watching trucks drive by carrying rock, or cement, or supplies. The elders of the tribes met to talk. The conversation ranged from anger to cool acceptance and back into anger again. There was talk of sabotage. There was talk of negotiation. There was talk of moving sacred remains from the ancient burial sites. There was talk and more talk. Edmo, his brother, and their friends listened to the meetings from outside the windows, and heard the words amounting to nothing as the weeks and months and trucks went by. They decided to do something about it.

The builders put stakes into the ground, and painted lines in red and orange and yellow over the dirt, over the rocks and grass along the river. The boys wandered their old trails, dizzy in the presence of the painted lines that marked out what they did not understand: future roads or outlying buildings or power lines, maybe. Edmo's brother came up with strategies. The boys went to the dam site to pull up the stakes and kick at the dirt until the painted lines were buried or left as ghostly reminders in the dust. They roamed the hills with BB rifles, shooting at the supply trucks that roared down the roads newly carved through ancient Native village sites. On the top of a hill overlooking one road, they rolled large rocks down on the trucks, sometimes denting their sides. If the trucks came to a stop, the boys ran or hid. They kept it up as long as they could: little things to prolong the inevitable.

Norm remembered hearing on the radio about these strangely minor attempts to sabotage the building of the dam. The news made it out to be a matter of national security, an act of violence against the Army Corp of Engineers. Other than that, the

news stayed clear of the "Indian problem" out at Celilo, usually only trumpeting the success of progress on the river.

The months went by. Steel framework and concrete appeared to grow up out of the rocks downstream. Even with the size of the project, the construction of the dam seemed a quiet thing next to the roar of the river. It was almost like it wasn't happening at all. More men were hired to paint more lines and hammer in more stakes and then more men came to guard those lines and stakes. The boys turned their attention to fishing.

In March of 1957, two weeks after his father and brother were gone, and several days before his mother died, the gates of the dam closed. The builders had used dynamite to blast away the rocks at the falls in order to make a passable channel for the barges and ocean-going vessels that would soon bring goods from overseas. Once the gates closed, it took six hours for the waters to rise up and cover Celilo, some eight miles upstream from the dam. Edmo watched beside his mother along the highway with hundreds of others. At first, there was talking and singing. Then the crowd grew silent, as if they wanted to hear the last sounds the water made before it grew still. The sound of roaring that had filled the valley for thousands of years hushed and then grew quiet. The distant hum of the dam operation rose up to take its place. It was a low sound, almost mournful, consoling as it droned out its dissonant tones along the still river.

Norm remembers the celebration of progress, the excitement in the air, especially on Television. Vice President Nixon came to the ribbon cutting of The Dalles Dam, the river suddenly becoming important to the success of democracy all

over the world. But Norm remembered some of the other changes that the dam brought to the river too, even as far as he was downstream. Giant barges with Asian symbols painted on their sides rumbled through the lower Columbia. He began to catch more sturgeon and squaw fish that were multiplying below the dams, feeding off the eggs of fish that couldn't make it upstream. Fish runs dwindled, and the natives were blamed for over-fishing in their areas. Further upstream, with the river now a series of unbroken lakes linked by navigable locks, new official rules were established for the Natives regarding fishing, followed by a new language of unofficial, unspoken rules. Officially, Natives couldn't fish with nets from certain rocks near the dam on either side. Officially, they kept their rights to their fishing areas. Unofficially, there were fewer fish to catch, ancient sacred sites were gone, and Natives were expected to get out of the way of the results that progress had made. Rules of the road changed. A vessel under sail (you could set sails on the river now), or using paddles, supposedly had right of way over vessels under power on the newly bloated river, but the commercial vessels had an unofficial right of way according to their size. They couldn't stop quickly, and so you got out of their way to avoid being overrun. You fished, and you always looked over your shoulder. Barge horns echoed off the surrounding hills, adding to the new sounds of railway and highway traffic that had risen to replace the pounding voice of the river.

People fished from newly built platforms along the shore, or in boats, sometimes at night under the bright lights of the dams, but their catches were paltry compared to the ton of fish they used to be able to catch in a day. Fines were handed out but went unpaid. Some Natives fished and refused to carry identification, or used

the names of dead relatives when they were caught. The government created incentives to draw Natives into urban life. That's when you started seeing more Indians downtown, Norm said, where drink and the government lured them.

Edmo moved from one family to the next for several months after the dam started harnessing the power of the river and then he moved away to another boarding school. Some of Edmo's friends went to Portland, following the increasing tide of Indians who would move into the city looking for work. Years later, he would meet up with them on the streets downtown.

So Edmo was pretty much an Indian, Norm said, just about looking the part. He had lived at the marina for half a dozen years. Rumor had it that he spent 20 years or so living downtown until the day he found a winning lottery ticket and spent the money on a sailboat.

Norm paused here, as if to bring one kind of telling to an end. "And the rest," he said, "as you know, is not exactly history."

I V.

Edmo came into the store slowly one day, pausing at the door and coughing. I hadn't known him for very long. He left toward the end of September, a few weeks after I had arrived. He leaned across the counter and shook his head, smiling. His grin was unself-conscious, contagious. He wore a dark baseball cap that said "Native Pride" across the front. He wore a gold cross around his neck. He smiled. When he wasn't smiling, which was rare, he was probably just about to start. He looked down

through the glass counter top at the rows of candy bars as if trying to choose. Other customers came in and out of the store, but Edmo stepped back from the counter and waited. I saw that he was intending to stay, that he had something to talk about. When the store was empty, Edmo approached the counter again and asked for his "four M's:" his daily collection of Menthols and three packages of M&Ms. He had been to the doctor, he said. "Seems I'm falling apart at the seams."

"Is it something serious?"

"Oh, no. Just the old flesh doing what it does best. And too many of these damn things."

Edmo waved the pack of smokes in the air and shook his head. "You know, that doctor today? She asked if I was sexually active." He laughed, coughed, and laughed some more. "I told her: 'Ma'am, I've been divorced 15 years and I haven't had sex in 20. You do the math. Other than using my hands, there hasn't been much point.'" Edmo opened one of the bags of candy and popped some into his mouth. I started pulling files off the shelf behind me. Norm kept talking. "You know, when two people come together like that, it's not just some physical thing. There are two spirits there connecting too. Another spirit mixing with mine would make it harder for my own spirit to speak in its own voice, you know? Or to hear what only a spirit can hear. Believe me, I know. I was married once. Too many feelings bouncing off the walls in there to hear anything but what feelings have to say.'"

I put the files down on my desk. Edmo talked on and I listened. At some point, the door opened, and Larry entered. He nodded at us and sat down in Rich's empty leather chair, disappearing behind a newspaper. Edmo didn't seem to notice.

He talked for some time. He told me about his years living on the street in Portland, about Jesus reaching out to him, about finding the winning lottery ticket, about getting his bad hip healed in a church downtown, about leaving the church when they stopped praying so much and started preaching - talking a lot, whereas before, there had been more emphasis on listening to what the Holy Spirit wanted to say.

I told him I had grown up in church too, that I wanted to believe in a capital "T" Truth, but not in the people who talked too much about it. I stopped. I wondered if what I had just said was true, or if it was just a convenient thing to say to him. I sensed I had been more honest with Edmo than I would have been with myself. Suddenly, in Edmo's presence, I wasn't sure what might come out of my mouth.

Edmo tapped the pack of smokes on the counter several times and coughed. "That's right. That's right. I figure, why should I go listen to one person stand in front of a room full of people telling everybody what to believe? I know what I believe." He pointed at his chest. "I've bet my life on Jesus being who he said he was. I've bet my life that there's a Great Spirit, and that Spirit loves the things He has made, not just certain people who say all the right things, you know? He fills everything in every way. All things, all around us. Whatever you see. He loves it and he is working in it, healing it."

The light from the windows behind Edmo cast his shadow across the counter, over the cash register, the fingerprints and smudges on the glass, the rows of candy underneath.

I pulled a folder off the shelf behind me. "I wish I could believe all that," I said, and I knew now that I meant what I said.

"No, you just wish you could *feel* it. It's easier to believe than you think. Easier than *feeling* the truth of what you believe."

"Hmm. Maybe."

He looked at me and pointed again at his chest. "Once you discipline your heart, you can begin to listen with it. There are so many organs inside you that can listen as well as speak. We usually only let our heart drown in all that it has to say, all the feelings, or the desire for feelings, or we close up our heart altogether so that it won't speak or listen. The Great Spirit is a good teacher. It knows when to speak and how to listen."

The door slid open. It was Marge. For the first time, Edmo stopped smiling. I had seen Edmo avoiding her before. He always came in after she was gone or left when she showed up. There were other women at the marina that seemed to be drawn to him too, to his smile, his quiet, piercing gaze. He turned back to me.

"Listen, I'm glad we had this conversation. It's time for me to get back. There's this metaphysical counselor on cable at 2:00 I never miss. She's *right on* a lot of the time."

V.

Edmo would disappear sometimes for a couple of days. No one could find him. Bill or Larry or Norm would climb aboard his boat and look. They would go up and check his white van and find it still in the parking lot. Eventually, a day or two later, he would show up for coffee. Sometimes he would say that he had gone for a

walk along the river. "For two days?" Larry asked, but Edmo would only look up, a confused smile on his face, saying: "Oh, I wasn't gone that long. Just out for a walk." Other times, he would look surprised and say that he had been around all along, that he hadn't gone anywhere. The guys would insist that they had searched everywhere but Edmo would just shrug. "I've been around," he would say, "you just didn't look hard enough."

You could tell these things grated on Norm, though he rarely said so. One morning, though, Norm couldn't contain himself when Edmo said that he had found a fish in his bilge. I think Norm's explosion had something to do with me being there on the fringes of the conversation.

I had come in early to do inventory. I was changing the prices on the gas pumps nearby, and making calculations, taking my time. As they arrived, one at a time, almost everyone sat down in small puddles of cold water in their green, plastic chairs. Norm shuffled around the corner first and disappeared into the store. He came back outside soon after with his coffee and sat down. He suddenly jumped back up and shouted.

"Goddamnit!"

I dropped my clipboard. That was the first Norm noticed me. He glared and swiped the rest of the water from the chair with the palm of his hand.

"Here kind of early aren't you, Chadwick? Here for the fucking show?"

I shook my head and pointed to the clipboard. "Work," I said. "Crunching numbers."

Larry came around the corner, went inside and soon returned with a steaming cup. Norm pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and coughed hard into it several times. I was about to warn Larry about the water when he looked down at the chair, tipped it forward until the water had drained, and then he sat down. The two men were quiet. Even outside, the air was heavy with the silence of the men. I considered going into the store and finishing up the fuel pumps later, but then Edmo came around the corner. By the time Edmo got there the other two seemed to have genuinely forgotten about the water. I had. Edmo barely flinched as he stood back up and tipped the remaining water from the chair onto the dock. He told them about the fish as he sat back down. He said he kept hearing a swishing sound under the floorboards and when he pulled them up to look, there it was, a tiny salmon leaping in and out of the bilge water. I looked up to see if he was messing around but I could only make out the back of his head. His voice never faltered.

There was silence. I scratched away with a pencil on the clipboard and waited for the end of the joke, but it never came.

Norm asked Edmo if he had found the fish *before* or *after* he had thrown it in there.

Larry said that it probably couldn't have been there long since it wouldn't last in the dirty bilge water.

Norm slammed his cup down on the table. "You're both full of horse shit! How did it get in there, Edmo?"

"I don't know, Norm."

"Quit farting around! No way a fish could get in there in the first place unless there was a big fucking hole in the bottom of the boat that you were too busy or too dumb to notice."

I walked quietly over to the diesel pump a dozen steps down the dock, unclipped the top page and placed it behind the others.

Norm spoke again. "Listen, Edmo. If you're going to tell a story, at least tell something that makes some sense."

I gazed at Edmo for a moment to see if his face looked as sincere as his words sounded. He was smiling, but his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Norm. He shook his head. "I'm not interested in merely telling stories, Norm. I'm just trying to tell you what I saw. There is more going on in the world than you can fit in a story, anyway. I'm just telling you what I know. Just events. Not stories. Not preaching, it's just there, just what it is, you know? For reasons we can't tell and that we could never see with our eyes. Do you know that there are light waves that we can't even see, even with all our technology? And yet we know they are there."

"Yeah, Edmo, it's called television. It's called radio." Norm's hand waved in front of Edmo's face. "There's music and debate and sermons broadcasting all over the place. Right here. Right now."

"And there's more than that, too."

"Yeah, that wouldn't surprise me too much, I guess. But a good story has a good conclusion, comes full circle, you know? It has a beginning that sets us up for what the rest of it's gonna be. But you come down here every day and say things like, 'Hey fellas! There's a fucking fish swimming in my bilge water!' and then you just

leave it at that!" Norm slammed the glass tabletop with the palm of his hand. "*How the fish got there,* Edmo: that's where the story is."

Edmo leaned forward, smiling. "Not stories, Norm. *How the fish got there* is one thing, talking about how it got there is another. It's guesswork. Just an interesting story. I'm interested in the truth, whether it's interesting or not. Whether any of us want to believe it or not."

"Whether it's *interesting* or not? Your *truth* would have Crazy Horse flying out of my ass!" Norm's finger shook only inches from Edmo's face. "No truth, Ed-man. Only stories." Norm leaned back into his chair.

Edmo spoke again, calmly. "But the fish got in there somehow before I told about it, and before you wanted me to tell about it in a certain way. It's all too much talk anyway. We should let our lives do the talking for us."

The men grew quiet. The dock swayed under our feet. My heart pounded. I reminded myself to keep writing, to breathe. Larry held a cup of coffee to his lips, squinting into its heat. Edmo's eyes turned heavily toward the ground, but he was still smiling. Norm wasn't. Bill came around the corner, said good morning, and sat down.

Everyone jumped a little when Bill leaped to his feet, holding onto the table for balance. I broke the pencil tip on the clipboard.

"Who put the goddamn puddle of cold water in this seat?" He asked. The others chuckled, a little harder than the situation warranted. Bill glanced around, searching their eyes. Then he gave a wry smile and sat back down. "Oh, what the hell, I'm already wet anyway. Sure felt good on the hemorrhoids, you know?"

Norm was smiling now, too. "I'm surprised it soaked so quick through those diapers you're wearing, Bill."

Larry stood up and offered to go get the coffee pitcher. "You almost missed it, Bill. Edmo here was just about to tell us how a salmon got into his bilge."

"No, I wasn't. I was just saying that one was there, that's all. You guys should come take a look."

They all went in to fill up on coffee and then went to take a look, each carrying a warm paper cup silently down the dock, trying not to wake anyone up along the way. Larry told me about it later when I asked: sure enough, when they had climbed aboard, there was a little fish in the bilge, but it was floating on its side on the green, oily surface. That whole next week, the men made guesses about how the fish got there. The inquiry came to a close when Bill came up with his theory. The key, he said, was in all the fishing that went on aboard Edmo's boat. "Maybe, at some point Edmo dropped some bait - a salmon egg - in the main cabin where it rolled through the cracks in the floor and into the bilge. Then, with all the gutting and washing of fish out on deck, in the rain, the appropriate seed washed its way into all those cracks on the topsides, ran down between the fiberglass hull and the interior lining of the ship and into the bilge where it spawned our little friend." It was the best idea anyone had come up with.

Edmo never offered any suggestions; he only added more of the supernatural into the mix. He said that the night before he found the fish, he dreamed he was trying repeatedly to climb the fish ladder up at Bonneville, that he would almost get

to the top and then some guy in big boots kicked him in the head until he slid all the way back down the ladder and into the river again.

Norm said, "Kicked in the head is right," but stopped short then, shaking his own head. "It's the damnedest thing, really," he said, and let it go at that.

V I.

One of the last things Edmo found floating by his boat at night before he left the marina was a corked bottle with a note in it. The next morning he said he was leaving. He said it was time for him to head back upstream, back to the source of things. He spoke of a recent string of dreams and visions he had when he was half asleep at night, dreams of dams breaking and the salmon returning like they did in the old days.

Norm asked about the note in the bottle, if leaving had something to do with that. The paper was smeared except for a phone number at the bottom. Edmo said when he called the number, it was only some kid who had written the note and sent it down the river to see who would find it. "It's just the right time," he said, "time for me to go."

He left several nights later. Bill and Larry helped him shove off while he raised the sails. It turned out that his boat didn't even have a working engine. Larry tried to give him a small outboard but Edmo refused. He would follow the wind and set anchor when he needed to, tie off to other boats when he got to the locks. Other sailors would have spent months in preparation for a long trip. Edmo prepared by

selling his van and removing the plastic angel from the stern and attaching her to the bow pulpit with wire where she could gaze out ahead of the boat. After that, he was ready to go.

In the afternoon, I had heard he might be leaving soon and handed him a whole box of M&M packages when he came into the store. I told him it was on me. I asked why he felt he had to leave, what had happened, but he only shook his head. He placed a trembling hand on my shoulder, his eyes welling up a little. "Sorry, I usually cry in the *mornings*," he said. I told him to call us when he got to where he was going. He nodded and said, "You'll hear from me."

VII.

Two mornings after he left, on a Saturday, I rode my motorcycle in the rain up the Columbia and into the Gorge on the Oregon side of the river, crossing at the Bridge of the Gods and then heading back along the Washington shore. I brought my binoculars with me and stopped frequently under overpasses or thick stands of evergreen along the way to get out of the rain, and so I could look out over the river. I couldn't find the sailboat anywhere.

VII.

What am I supposed to make of any of this? There are those on the dock who write Edmo off with a shake of their heads. A simple gesture. Or maybe it is an

acknowledgment, a tentative conclusion in the face of all that is left unknown or unknowable. The shake of the head might reflect the desire in us, however faint, for Edmo to have been right where we are wrong: that to see into our lives, or beyond them, we must come to terms with mystery, come to terms with the unseen causes and effects, which is to say, we must appear a little crazy, become a little crazy, even. When others speak and laugh at Edmo's words, sometimes I laugh too. But sometimes, I hesitate.

Telling Edmo's story is a process of gathering, of piecing things together, of imagining. What happened on the night he decided to leave? I am left with unknowns, the unseen things, the realm of the imagination:

Edmo is sitting on the back deck of the boat in the dark, dozing, a half-filled bottle resting on the stern pulpit by his elbow. The clouds roll in over the moon. The rains are coming. The wind hums in his ears, and then the roar of falling water. The earth shakes. He sees The Dalles Dam take off like a giant space ship up into the sky, raptured to some other world. A mountain of water collapses over the bedrock, flowing down the river, its sleeping strength suddenly waking, pushing downstream in a massive wave, until, further downstream Bonneville dam collapses under the renewed force of the river. Salmon begin leaping out in the Pacific. The water and air are full of them, thousands, millions. The surface of the ocean dances with them. They press like a river upstream to meet the flood. A wall of water washes across the Columbia River basin heading out to sea. The giant wave pours over Sauvie Island, rising over the road across the channel, towering above him and plunging down.

Edmo jumps to his feet. The rushing water is gone. The clouds hang black in the sky over the channel, the wind whistles in the rigging above him. His mouth is dry, his skin sweating, heart racing. The lights from the dock glisten on something in the water upstream. He reaches for his net and pulls the bottle out of the water as it floats near. There is a note inside. He can only make out the phone number - Portland area code. Since he doesn't own a telephone, he goes to the pay phone on the fuel dock to try the number. The phone purrs on the other end of the line. The message machine clicks on...

Maybe Edmo is right. Maybe I should just let it be rather than trying to make it into something I can understand, merely a story told in a certain way. Ultimately, conclusions are tentative at best in the face of mystery. I hesitate more now about some conclusions, especially the ones that assume knowledge that can somehow fill the space of all that is unknown under its rising waters. Edmo wanted his life to speak about something bigger than his life. We eventually found answers for why he left, but answers aren't the same thing as conclusions. And peace, or even satisfaction, is not guaranteed by getting all your questions answered. We did, after all, hear from him, or at least about him, like he said we would. It took a month or so, but we heard. And I still wonder at the answers.

IX.

I guess it's fitting that at least some answers came, at last, over the radio waves, unseen waves caught by the short wave radio behind the counter at the marina store. It had been raining for several weeks and the river was in flood. The dams upstream were letting out water in machine-like precision, spillways were roaring, even the channel was high for this time of year after the dry summer. "Unusual weather," the local news reports said, "record precipitation levels."

There had been a news story running for several days out in The Dalles, but the news was a little off kilter for the likes of the broadcasting networks in Portland. It didn't make news in Portland until the day that cracks started appearing in The Dalles Dam.

When we heard about the dam, we searched the radio bands until we found a station broadcasting from The Dalles. That's where we found out a little more about Edmo.

For the past 3 or 4 days, the news out there had been following the story of the crazy Indian who was trying to fish in the off-limit area around the spillway near the dam. Whenever the guards went down to fine him or arrest him, he evaded them. He just seemed to disappear. The news got stranger. One morning, a week or so after they first spotted the Indian, guards at the dam heard the sound of a trumpet down near the spillway. One of the employees at the dam said it sounded like a hymn. When the guards went down to investigate, they found the silver trumpet in the mist at the edge of the shore near the spillway, but no Indian. They never heard or saw

him again. Later that day, news of cracks in the dam reached the broadcasters in Portland. That was the day Larry suggested turning the radio dial to a Dalles station.

In the days that followed, the cracks in the dam lengthened, but the rain stopped, and the water level slowly went down. Contractors started bidding on the work to patch up the dam. Trucks started arriving, bringing the workers. Workers filled cracks and reinforced the foundations.

We left the radio dial tuned to the Dalles station for the next couple of weeks and that's how we heard about the body of the Indian they found downstream from the dam. A handful of Yakama Indians had identified the remains, and Edmo was buried in a small graveyard next to his mother. Local Native tribes were hailing him as the Joshua who almost brought down Jericho. In the following days, the radio told us how The Dalles Dam security had their hands full fining and arresting Native Americans who were congregating at the foot of the dam with trumpets, trombones, and whatever other instruments they could get their hands on. The news eventually died down. We turned the radio dial back to something more local.

* * *

Edmo is down in the mist and the rain, the concrete walls towering above him. The salmon are jumping, churning in the river before him. There is water all around. He presses the stops on the trumpet and blows. At first, the notes seem lost in the rushing water and the rain, but when he pauses, notes echo off the walls of the dam, filling what room there is left in the air where there isn't any water. His song lifts up through air and water. Water falling and water rising. The river flows and lifts, joining the sky, joining the notes of the song. The earth rumbles and shifts, the

grating of rock and stone. Edmo coughs, water filling his lungs. He blows into the trumpet again, sending out notes into the air; the song carrying through his coughing in what little air is left around him. Water swallows everything. Solid ground dissolves under his feet. Bright red salmon brush past his arms and legs and chest. Then it all rushes away. No rain. No air. No song. There is only river.

X.

After Edmo left, he slowly became the unofficial patron saint of the marina. The Edmo-shaped hole in the community was larger than anyone had thought it could be. The story the marina has to tell about Edmo seems to have no end. By the next summer, there was still more to tell. It turned out that even I had more to offer. Perhaps there is more yet that someone still holds onto, waiting for memory to find it, or waiting for the right time to add it to the larger story. There is so much no one would have put together though, I think, if it wasn't for Larry.

Something changed in Larry as the fall turned toward winter. He sobered in more ways than one. At first, I thought it was Norm that kept bringing up Edmo, telling the outrageous stories there were to tell about him. In the mornings, I would hear Edmo's name come up and I would stop to listen. It was usually Larry that had spoken his name or steered the conversation in his direction. I don't know if Norm noticed or not, but I did. Larry was keeping Edmo in the consciousness of the marina. No doubt, Edmo would have been in the conversation anyway, but Larry was the one who seemed interested in keeping the man alive in a purposeful way, his

stories, his habits, his perspective, perhaps even his quirky faith. So, while it was Norm who told and retold Edmo's stories, and through Norm that I found out the most about him, I think it was Larry who created a space for those stories to exist in a way that challenged us to think beyond the end of the telling, challenged us in the way that Edmo's presence used to.

* * *

At the end of spring, Jack and Edith left for warmer waters in the South Pacific. They had been on the channel for years, fixing up their 42-foot Chris Craft, hoping to someday make the journey south. A handful of people met on the dock for drinks the night before they left. Earlier that day, Larry had invited me to the gathering.

I arrived late. Someone had brought several jugs of wine. Larry handed me a glass and then filled it, spilling a little over the edge and onto the wood below our feet. I sat down in an empty space on a large cooler next to Larry. Jack was just finishing some speech they must have pulled out of him.

"There are two kinds of people down here:" he said, "those who would head out into blue waters in order to make that big left turn to warmer weather, and those who would make the big right turn to even more rain and snow. Edith and I are making a left turn."

"You got that wrong, there, Jack," said Norm over the chatter. Norm's hands waved across the air in front of him, as if to erase the words that others were speaking, and that still hung in the air about him. "There are three kinds of people. There are those that make a right turn, those that go left, and there are those of us who

sit here on our asses talking about someday leaving this place. You, my friends, are doing it, and that is all that matters. Here's to you." He held his glass high. The others held out their cans and bottles and glasses in silence. Jack looked down at his glass, and wiped at his nose. Edith covered her face and said that someone should change the subject to something with less finality to it. The night air grew quiet.

Larry spoke into the silence, "What about the fourth kind of person down here, the one who heads upstream?" He smiled. Still, no one spoke.

Norm cleared his throat. "What is there to see upstream once you get past Beacon Rock? I'll tell you: the dead river, that's what. A bunch of wind surfers and grain barges stirring up the lakes that go from one dam to another up beyond Cascade locks. You've gotta go clear up into Canada, to the river's source, in order to find that other kind of blue water." Several people laughed and chimed in, all talking at the same time.

Larry met my gaze.

I spoke, more loudly than I had intended. "I think Larry's talking about Edmo, isn't he? The fourth kind of person we have down here that goes some other way."

The air grew still again. Norm took a sip of wine and coughed, spilling onto his white T-shirt. Norm cleared his throat loudly. "Edmo, huh? I guess Edmo belongs to a type of person that includes only Edmo himself, and no one else that I've ever met. So much for types of people."

Norm talked on for some time. It was the first I had heard about Edmo's family, about the falls at Celilo, about Edmo being a sort-of misfit Eastern-Western Indian. The air began moving - a soft breeze. The wine jugs went around the circle.

Then Norm told something he said he hadn't told anyone before.

"You know that plastic angel he had mounted on his boat? Well, let me tell you something about that angel. I threw that damn thing in the river at the boat ramp upstream, that's where it came from. God's messenger: that's what I am! My sister put that damn angel on my mother's grave. An awful thing it was to see it there on my mother's grave. She never cared for religion and it would have twisted her in knots if she could have seen it there. When my sister died, I sent it on its way down the river. The next day, I was doing my rounds, and wouldn't you know, there was that angel on the back of Edmo's boat giving him some kind of sign for who knows what. It took a couple weeks for him to realize that the damn thing was made of glow-in-the-dark material."

Norm looked around. No one was laughing. His shirt was red from the collar down to where the wine had pooled above his stomach. He coughed again. "When I heard they found his boat tied up at a dock up there in The Dalles, I got a ride out to the gorge and I saw that angel sitting next to a dumpster. I took it. Now it's sitting by Edmo's grave where it belongs."

Larry cleared his throat and looked at the floor. He said Edmo had told him something else about the phone number he found in the bottle. "The note was from a boy who wanted to know who found the bottle, but the phone number belonged to the music shop owned by the boy's father." Larry paused and held up his hand. He said he would swear on a duct-taped bible if there were one present. "It was the same music shop that Edmo's dad had worked in all those years ago." He paused to let it sink in. "When he left us, he sailed up the Willamette into Portland first to return the

bottle to the boy's father at the music store before he made his way up the Columbia. He must have bought himself a trumpet before he left the city."

Marge said that it was too bad Edmo never went to church or they would have made him a saint. "Or maybe he was too handsome in his day to have been a saint."

Someone hooted. Someone else hissed.

Larry looked at me again, a quick glance.

I told about the church where Edmo said he was healed, about him leaving because people talked too much and didn't listen. I told about the letters from the doctor that I had recently found at the bottom of a drawer in the office and had opened, about the doctor telling him to get in touch right away, about the malignant tumors that were growing in Edmo's lungs. "He never got those letters," I said, "but I think he knew."

The group was silent for a long time.

Norm reached for the jug. "I can't seem to suck anymore wine out of this shirt, so I'm going to pour another glass." He looked over to Bill and me, and then over to Larry. "You know, sometimes I wonder if he put that fucking fish in his own bilge just to piss me off."

Balance

Larry's Journal

The Eremitical Life

Monday, November 18

I thought I might start a journal. Something is different now, but I don't know what and maybe I won't ever know, but maybe I can mark the change with some words, some sentences. Maybe nothing has changed. Maybe I'll just find out what I've thought all along: I never really have had much to say.

Enough. I'm going fishing.

Tuesday, November 19

It is like part of my mind has been asleep all these years to the immensity of the world, to the possibilities that come with each day. Anything might happen. It is a tough change to describe by looking directly at it – like trying to look at your eyes rather than looking through them.

Wednesday, November 20th

I went searching for the box of old books on the boat today. The few I found were spotted with mildew. Augustine's City of God was in there and several by Thomas Merton and some books on sailing. I set aside Augustine and Merton and threw the rest of the box into the recycling. Maybe what I said to the Lendaways about living the contemplative life here on the river wasn't entirely a lie. Maybe it's what I've been wanting all along: the life of the hermit, a truly eremitical kind of recluse.

Thursday, November 21

I stopped drinking from the flask. It didn't seem right somehow with the pearls in there. I bought some thick shot glasses for drinking. Seems more civilized and less work than tipping back a heavy bottle over and over.

Saturday, November 23

Another difference I've noticed: I'm smoking a pipe more now. It keeps the mosquitoes away in the evening, and it keeps certain people away too. Next week, I thought I might go to the library, check out some books. Sit here and read them with my pipe. A regular goddamn professor, I'd make.

Tuesday, November 26

I drove to the library in downtown Portland to see if my old library card still worked. I searched the first floor for the card catalog, but all I could see were books and computers and more computers. I walked along the shelves instead, reading the titles to get an idea of where the sections were on the first floor and then the second. By the time I got to the third floor and found the section I was after, I was pretty hungry, and sober, but I stayed for a while, scanning the shelves. There were a few titles I remembered from seminary. Some more books on Augustine and Merton. I pulled a bunch of those off the shelves.

At the front counter, they had a new computer system that couldn't read my old card and the number on the card showed up as canceled. Some of the other

librarians gathered around to look at the old card. They gazed back and forth between it and me as if perhaps I had only just woken from decades of sleep. They asked for a new Multnomah county address and since I didn't have one, I made up a P.O. Box number on the spot, using an old zip code I remembered. I didn't have identification to match it, but they let it go since I'm an old man checking out theology books. They gave me a new card and I left. I was pretty hungry by then, and sober, so I drove back north on Highway 30, chewing on some old beef jerky I had stashed behind the seat until my jaw became sore and then quit working altogether.

Monday, December 2

Today on the fuel dock, Chad pumped diesel into a sailboat that had a gasoline engine. By the time I came outside to check on him, he had pumped twelve gallons of the wrong fuel into the customer's tank. I called the boat yard and Mike and Gary came down with a pump to clean the tank out. I told Chad I was going to have to watch him like a hawk. Granted, it's kind of odd for a sailboat not to have a diesel engine, but he's got his head in the clouds so much, something like this was bound to happen. Rich came into the office later and took me aside to ask what had happened and I told him I had been helping on the dock and had handed Chad the wrong fuel hose, so it was my fault. As far as I know, Chad never heard about that conversation.

Sunday, December 8

Even if I haven't looked at a calendar all week, when I wake up on Sundays, I can feel the difference in the air. The rest of the week, I roll out of bed and have to check what day it is. But not on Sundays. The world seems sharpened and charged with possibility. I'll call it "imminence" for lack of a better word. The sky, or the river might suddenly crack open and some light or darkness would spill out into the world and envelop all things and you'd recognize it, as if you'd expected it to happen all along, some goodness or some horror or both at the same time. You'd say, "Yes, there it is." Imminence. Other people seem to sense it too. We greet one another when passing on the dock, which is becoming a rarity.

I've been wondering what I might have been writing for homilies all these years if I had kept up the old Catholic life. After Vatican 2, everyone was trying to make sense of the whole homily thing, turning to face the congregation rather than speaking toward the Eucharist. What might I have planned to say today if my life had turned out differently? Maybe only vague notions about "imminence." Maybe that's why I quit. Nothing to say and too afraid to say anything anyway.

Wednesday, December 11

I started this writing with a question: So, what's different? What kind of gift can be passed on from a dying girl? What kind of door have I stepped through?

But there is no difference, really. People change in fairy tales and in the movies, but not much otherwise. The stories I read every day in the newspaper try to offer a certain kind of window on the world. Usually the window is the mere

possibility of a change in the character of some person or group of persons. Politicians don't change much. It might look too much like weakness.

We want to see people change, and to read about the possibility of it. We want to hear sermons that promise us we can become better versions of ourselves if we just do this or that or work under the right philosophy. But we are pretty much stuck with who we are.

If there is a difference in me, it's that I've started writing these things down. Not much else has changed, or if it has, I may never know. That's what I get for asking.

Saturday, December 21

Dark days. Christmas-suicide days. They don't list all the Portland-area deaths in the paper any more. I drink to the ones they do list and then I drink to all the ones that probably aren't making the news. It's a tough job, grieving. You never know when you're done.

Friday, December 27

I found Gracie's obituary today on the microfilm at the library. I couldn't figure out how to make a printout, so I copied it down and put it in my wallet. I put away the flask inside the chart table and read a prayer for her from a prayer book I bought.

"Grace Ann Lendaway passed away on the 5th of August, 2002 at the age of seven. Our Gracie loved to read, draw, and sing. Her calm, joyful presence

touched the lives of many in her short time with us. She brought great joy to her family and the many friends that met her before and during her struggle with cancer. A Memorial service will be held at 11:00am on the tenth of August at the Saint Mary's Academy in downtown Portland. Memorial contributions can be sent to the main office at Saint Mary's Academy."

Thursday, January 2

I'm not sure where Augustine's City of God and City of Man begin in this world and end in the next, but there does appear to be a heaven and a hell right here with us. Perhaps the motions we make to reach out in order to give or to reach out in order to take invite a little heaven or a little hell into the world.

The tough part is that you can't always know when you see someone reaching out what kind of act it is or what will become of it. I can't even know whether or not my own words or actions make the world a better or worse place. I certainly can't come to any conclusions about what flows outward from my life, even when I mean well. Some good seems to have come from me taking that pearl from the bathroom floor, though maybe some unforeseeable evil is still working in it too.

There's a homily for you. It ain't much, but then, I ain't much of a priest.

Monday, January 6

Theology books these days. They've all got pictures of bright, cheery folks on the back of the cover, or even on the front. Probably their smiling wives and children are just outside the frame somewhere, cheering them on.

The books are different than the ones I used to read. Many of the writers are putting little blurbs from other writers and poets at the beginnings of each chapter. It's a trendy thing to do now, whether or not the blurbs make any sense in the context of the chapter, or the book. Mostly, the tripe that follows the blurbs is long, and drawn out. Just an expansion of what has already been made clear. The blurbs usually say it better anyway.

Maybe I'll start reading the folks who get blurbed since the writers who blurb them don't seem to be spending much time with them. I'll make a sojourn into the sub-blurbs of theological consideration. Oh, that's bad. There is the clearest evidence that I might still be wearing the priestly mantle: bad priestly humor.

Thursday, January 10

I'm reading some of the Christian mystics I've found in blurbs. They remind me a little of Edmo, fixing their eyes "not on what is seen." He has been gone now for almost four months. I wish he were still around, and that I hadn't been so quick to dismiss him when he was here. We might have started a kind of mystical river-rat reading group.

Edmo looked me right in the eye once and told me there was work yet for me to do in the world. I told him I hoped he didn't expect payment for his vague fortune telling. He smiled and said that it might cost me everything to learn to offer what I had to give. It might cost me my life.

Later that day, he disappeared and none of us could find him for several days. I figured he was probably floating face down in the river somewhere downstream, so

his final words rested heavily in my mind. Of course, he showed up eventually, wandering along the shore with half a dozen monstrous fish draped over his shoulder, even though the season for steel head had long since passed by for the rest of us.

Friday, January 11

> "I certainly find secret things in ourselves which often amaze me-and so many more there must be! O my Lord and my God! How wondrous is Thy greatness! And we creatures go about like silly little shepherd-boys, thinking we are learning to know something of Thee when the very most we can know amounts to nothing at all, for even in ourselves there are deep secrets which we cannot fathom" (Theresa of Avilla, 37).

> "For it is God's love that warms me in the sun and God's love that sends the cold rain. It is God's love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that feeds me also by hunger and fasting. It is the love of God that sends the winter days when I am cold and sick, and the hot summer when I labor and my clothes are full of sweat: but it is God Who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood" (Merton, 427).

Sunday, January 13

> "One of the most important – and most neglected – elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things...For asceticism is not merely a matter of renouncing

> television, cigarettes, and gin. Before we can begin to be ascetics, we first have to learn to see life as if it were something more than a hypnotizing telecast. And we must be able to taste something besides tobacco and alcohol: we must perhaps even be able to taste these luxuries themselves as if they too were good" (Merton, 386).

I've never been much of a gin drinker, but I went into Scappoose today and bought a couple of bottles and refilled the tobacco pouch to get into the spirit of things.

Tuesday, January 14

First thing this morning, before frying up breakfast even, I poured a little gin and cleaned out the pipe and smoked a little Cherry Cavendish. It was raining and the drops came in through the window here and there, but it was warm inside, and the spots of rain on the stepladder and the counter dried not long after they landed. The rain clattered on deck and on the surface of the river outside. The smoke rose into the air in waves like a fine cloth. The gin warmed me, and though I find I don't care for it, I could say that it added to the beauty of the morning. It was different than the *imminence* of Sundays. More like Merton's "beauty in ordinary things," as if the beauty is always there whether we see it or not.

I tried to stretch out that full feeling that came with the smoke and the gin and the rain as long as I could, but when I saw that I was enjoying them, it left me. I kept puffing away at the tobacco and filling the glass, but I couldn't make it come back. I was soon too hungry and too sick to think about anything other than my own wretchedness.

Sunday, February 16

Sometimes, things happen that make your life seem small and immense at the same time. I might have just stayed on the dock today, fishing, but there were a couple of books on hold for me at the library and so I went. After what happened when I got there, I didn't even remember to pick up the books.

I was waiting in front of the library for the doors to open. Several dozen others stood waiting on the steps beside me. A strange, quiet urgency came over me to be the first to get inside. I stood close to the door. Stupid. It's not like someone is really going to go get all the good books before I can, especially the kind of books I'm reading. Maybe it was an urgency to get away from the crowd. The air was quiet, even with all those people. Maybe we were all a little anxious to get inside. Clouds hung above the trees. An Indian stood at the top of the steps by the door, his arms folded, like a man guarding the entrance. He was a head or two taller than everyone else, staring down the steps at the sidewalk below.

I looked at my watch. Two more minutes to go. Then I heard a sound like a large animal panting at the bottom of the steps. I turned to look. A man in rags paced over the sidewalk, breathing loudly. Several people glanced down. The man grunted, slowly meeting people's gazes, one by one. He looked in my eyes, my chest suddenly burning, like a match had struck somewhere behind my ribs. I tried to breathe. He looked away and then started shouting.

"What the fuck are you mother fuckers looking at? You know I could fuck you all up?" His pants were shredded at the cuffs. They were huge on him; a thick

belt with a silver buckle was the only thing holding them up. A woman on the bottom step slowly ascended away from him. He looked at her and she stopped. No one else moved.

"You know who I am? I could do it. Fuck the shit out of any one of you! That's right! I know! You think I don't know?"

I didn't move, hoping I wouldn't have to look into those eyes again. A man on the other side of the steps yelled that he should quiet down or go away. He either ignored the words or didn't hear them.

"How about you? Yeah, you! Big guy! You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

The flames spread in my chest. I looked down. He was pointing at the Indian. He undid the buckle at his waist and whipped the belt out in one quick sweep.

"You know, don't you, you big fuck?"

The Indian hadn't moved. His eyes darted back and forth. The man folded the belt in half and snapped the two ends together. He grabbed the waist of his pants with one hand to hold them up, and with the other, he rocked the belt back and forth down by his bare feet. The man with the belt started up the steps toward the Indian. It occurred to me that I should start praying quietly in my mind, if only there was room in there to think of words to pray with. I wanted to pound on the doors behind me and scream. Why didn't they open the goddamn doors?

The Indian's eyes were red. He looked down at the ground. The man with the belt yelled some more on his way up.

"That's fucking right! You know, don't you, big guy!"

Then a voice spoke beside me.

"Put the belt away."

The man with the belt whirled in my direction, but his gaze moved past me. He started wrapping the belt around his fist.

"What the fuck do you mean, put the belt away?"

I slowly turned my head to see who had spoken. A short man stood beside me. He wore a plaid shirt. He was skinny as a rail. He spoke again, softly. "Put the belt away. Put it back on."

"What do you mean? You don't think I know shit? I'll put the fucking belt on!"

"Just put the belt away," said the man beside me.

The belt guy cussed up a storm, but all the while, he slowly fed that belt through the loops in his pants. Once, he stopped and sneered at the man in the plaid shirt and said, "You don't know who I am. Don't fuck with me!"

"Put away the belt," said the man next to me.

Belt guy looped it through the buckle and started grunting again. He turned and ran down the steps and up the sidewalk, panting. Several people on the steps clapped. Everyone breathed.

I turned to face the guy in the plaid shirt. He shook his head and spoke up to the Indian: "Well, they let that guy out of detox a little too early, didn't they?"

The library doors opened and people poured inside. I must say that I went in pretty quickly, myself. In the lobby, I saw the Indian striding toward the bathroom. I looked around for the man in the plaid shirt, but I couldn't find him.

Monday, February 17

That guy in the plaid shirt. I keep trying to imagine myself speaking if he hadn't been there. I listen to myself saying the words: "Put away the belt. Put away the belt. Put away the belt." Is that all it takes? Just "put away the belt," over and over? He spoke without fear. He had authority. An authority I couldn't even dream of having. Where did that kind of authority, that absence of fear, come from? Maybe he just works with people like that belt guy. Authority from experience. Maybe authority is learned. Maybe it's just a skill, and I could go take a speech class to learn it. Or you become an expert about some subject and then you can speak with authority about it.

Since Edmo left, people have started coming to me for fishing advice. Now that Edmo is gone, I'm the guy they send fishermen to talk to. Maybe that's authority of a certain kind. I guess maybe I should stop making up bullshit that sounds good just to make other fishermen go away.

Thursday, February 20

On the day I took that pearl, young Gracie had a kind of authority, even though she didn't really say anything. Even though she is gone now, her life still holds onto mine with an earnest grip, some regal quality to her that seemed inherent,

like it did with the man in plaid. I'm still trying to live with the gift Gracie gave me, and I'm not just talking about the pearls. Some other gift that has freed me somehow, started me writing a journal again like I used to when I was younger. I'm not even sure what that gift is or how to open it or if it even really exists.

Tuesday, February 25

Maybe authority has to do with other people shutting up once you've spoken. Maybe it is what precedes an awed silence. That would mean that Norm has authority of a certain kind. But his is more like a protective blanket of ferocity than authority. But authority must be more than sounding brash, always getting the last word. Nobody dares to contradict Norm very often, although sometimes Bill does just to piss him off. Edmo did a couple of times too. I don't think of Edmo as having had authority, though sometimes he seemed to stumble across it when he spoke. He said we have certain vital organs in us that both speak and listen. Like our hearts. Strange, but maybe he's right. Our lungs kind of work that way. Breathing in and out. If I could tell Edmo about the man in the plaid shirt, he would have probably called him an "angel entertained unawares." After all, the guy in plaid disappeared, right?

Edmo told us one morning over coffee that an eagle landed on the stern pulpit of his boat once and stared at him through the window. Edmo got up and opened the back door and it never flinched, just sat there fixing its gaze on him. Edmo asked it if it had come to bring a message, or a gift of some kind. Then the eagle turned and beat its wings and lifted into the air and over the river toward the island. A feather floated down to the deck and the bird soon disappeared over the rim of the opposite

shore. Edmo held up the feather in front of our faces that morning and said, "Angels unawares." Norm wrinkled his face and said that a bird can be a beautiful thing on its own without turning it into Jesus or Mary or some cosmic mailman.

Maybe Edmo's life had authority despite the things he said. Maybe he had more authority the less he said. Words about him have a certain authority to them sometimes. What kind of conclusions can you reach about a guy like Edmo, a guy whose life seemed to speak of a world where anything might happen and everything came heavily laden with purpose? His life continues to speak now after he has left. No matter who is talking about Edmo, or how condescendingly they refer to him, and no matter who it is that's listening, you get the sense that most everyone deeply wants it all to be true, an actual historical account of the way it was, and the way it could be for the rest of us.

Land Sick

Bernice gazed through the cafe window where sunlight filtered through the leaves high above the crowded street, while her sister copied phone numbers onto a white slip of paper - work phone, cell phone, the salon, the tennis club, other clubs – all the places where she could be reached. Outside the window, people rushed by or lingered on the sidewalk, waiting for the streetcar. Several tables lined the wall under the overhang on the other side of the window. Women and men were laughing in their black, cast-iron chairs and stirring their coffee or tea with spoons that flashed silver whenever the sun broke through the trees. A woman with a large potted plant strode by, a cactus of some kind, dust motes trailing in the air behind her. The flecks of dust made sunbeams in her wake. Across the street was the library, the massive stone structure reaching up through the roof of branches and leaves. A man carrying a stack of books shuffled slowly down the steps of the library, pausing for a moment to balance the weight of them while reaching into his pocket for something, keys, maybe.

The dizziness passed over Bernice again. She closed her eyes for a moment to hold it at bay. Her sister didn't seem to notice. Bernice took another sip. The tea trembled in the white, porcelain mug. She had stayed on the river too long, too many years. This frantic spinning in her head might hang on now for a while. Days maybe. She had packed her bags that morning and left. Bill was on his own now. For a few days. Or maybe longer.

Elizabeth passed the slip of paper across the table. "There you go Bernice. If you can't reach me at the office or any of these other places, then I'm not reachable at all. The cell phone's just for emergencies."

People called her Bernie at the marina, but it wasn't bothering her so much anymore. And not being bothered was starting to bother her. It's not like the name "Bernie" was any shorter than the name "Bernice," or any easier to say. That was the whole point of familiar names, wasn't it? Convenience. It was the same with Marge from the middle marina. She wanted everyone to call her "Mar," and she practically demanded it, saying, "Go ahead and leave off the "g" next time, honey." And then there was Doris. Everyone called her Dory. What was wrong with these people?

A name was a treacherous thing. Everything else stemmed from there. She had read all about it in a magazine recently. Good economic standing could be traced back to certain successful-sounding names. Names were likely to affect intelligence quotient. Your name was often the first impression in new relationships. It determined the kind of people that would be attracted to you and even the quality of your relationships as they went along. Nicknames weren't the problem. It just depended on what the nickname was, or what it suggested. Men named "Richard" who used the familiar name "Rich" grew up more successful financially. There were statistics to prove it.

How different it would be on the river if she had become friends with a "Margaret" or a "Doris." You would never have tea in a downtown cafe with "Mar" or "Dory."

When Bill had convinced her to move onto the boat four or five years ago, she had tried politely to hold people to the name Bernice, but the name Bernie had stuck. It was a stubborn, masculine name that put people on the defensive, as if she were an insolent, presumptuous woman who needed to be put in her place. At least now, for the next few days, or weeks, while she was living with her sister, Elizabeth and the newest husband downtown, she could listen to people say her real name for a change.

Elizabeth picked up her cup by the small handle, steadying it underneath with a saucer in the other hand. Elizabeth asked if she was OK, maybe tea had been a bad idea so soon after arriving, maybe they should take their time, let her settle in a little before they tore up the town.

"No," Bernice said. "It's good to be anywhere as long as it is on dry land."

Bernice brought the cup of tea slowly to her lips. A blue and green streetcar hissed to a stop outside and the doors opened. A young couple at one of the tables outside stood up, fishing through their pockets. Bernice dropped the cup into the dish with a clink.

Elizabeth asked if everything was OK with Bill.

Bernice looked out the window and said that Bill was fine, just about to start a new job. They had both thought that a short vacation for her was a great idea.

The couple on the other side of the glass stood up. The woman tossed several coins onto the tabletop, grabbed the young man's arm and they ran through the door of the streetcar just before it closed. The train hissed as it rolled out of sight.

She was on *vacation*. That was the name attached to what she was doing here downtown. A vacation. That was what Bill called it earlier that morning when

Bernice had packed her bags and called her sister, looking for a place to stay. He said that a vacation was a great idea, especially before their upcoming trip.

She called in sick at the office in St. Helens where she worked two days out of the week. So these were "sick days" as far as the accounting firm was concerned. Sick days. Vacation days. Days to decide what to do, whether to quit her own job and join Bill on his trip down the coast to Southern California, or whether to let him go alone. He was starting the new job with the boat brokerage the next week, a position delivering boats by water up and down the coast. And he couldn't make these trips on his own. It would mean that they would spend even more time on the water instead of less.

Bernice let out a sigh, and gazed out the window. "Oh, Elizabeth, it's just so good to be on land, having tea in the city again, things happening all around, to be away from that floating trailer-park."

"Take your time with it all, Bernice," Elizabeth said. "We can talk whenever. When I'm not around, I'm always near a phone." Elizabeth reached for Bernice's hand across the table, her eyes wrinkled with concern. "I'm glad you knew you could come to us."

Bernice looked into her sister's eyes. "I'm on vacation. Really. A getaway trip for a few days. Don't try to make this into something it's not."

They grew silent for a while. The glass of the window radiated the heat of the afternoon sun. Perhaps Bernice had overdone it a little by wearing the heavy sweater. Elizabeth was wearing a thin blouse and a skirt too short for someone as old as she was. The blouse looked like it might even be made of silk. A breeze moved through

the leaves high above the street. Small, round wafers of light and shadow danced over the tables outside, over the cars and people passing by, over the bricks of the library walls.

On the other side of the glass, a man in gray rags staggered up to the table, scooped the change into his palm, and stepped away. A coin rang as it hit the sidewalk and rolled out into the street. Elizabeth didn't seem to notice. Funny. Of the things Bernice had seen so far today since arriving downtown, that homeless man seemed the most familiar, his loose stride, the slow meandering way about him. He could have been someone from the marina, a liveaboard, Bill even, minus the boat to live on and their savings account, her meager paychecks, her inheritance.

Elizabeth stiffened and looked at her watch. She'd forgotten something at the office. She would have to go back, but she wouldn't stay there for long. She slid a single key across the smooth, glass tabletop and told Bernice to go ahead and make herself at home. She asked if Bernice wanted her help getting back to the apartment.

Bernice shook her head and reached for the key. She said she would stay and finish her tea. Elizabeth leaned across the table and put an arm around Bernice's shoulder. Their cheeks touched for a moment. Bernice caught the heavy scent of her sister's perfume, the same old stuff, that officious, secretarial kind of smell. Then Elizabeth stood up straight and looked down at her. Bernice looked back out the window.

Her sister spoke again. "Bernice, I tell you what. I'll give you some space. I don't want to crowd in when you need some room to breathe. You let me know when you want to talk again. Jeffrey and I can head out of town for a few days if you'd

like, if you need some time to yourself. We've both got plenty of vacation time of our own. Just let me know. I'll see you, OK?"

When Elizabeth had passed out of sight down the sidewalk, Bernice stood up and walked toward the bathroom. Most of the tables on the way were empty. Several people huddled close, speaking softly. A photograph of the Portland skyline and the Willamette River hung on the wall behind the register counter.

The floor began to rock under her feet. There it was again: the dizziness. She tried to correct her balance and then overcompensated, placing her hand on the shoulder of a woman sitting at a table. She pushed off the shoulder and grabbed onto the back of an empty chair behind her. The woman turned around, brow wrinkled.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," said Bernice. She breathed deeply, walking quickly to the bathroom door, holding onto the backs of empty chairs along the way. She locked the stall door and sat down on the toilet, her eyes closed, her head spinning. She rocked back and forth on the seat trying to make it stop, trying to tell herself that land sickness wasn't the same thing as home sickness, that it was nothing compared to seasickness, and that Bernice was a lovely name, an elegant name, and that she longed to hear people say it.

* * *

Bill would run out of insulin in a couple of days, and then he would call her for help, probably, since he didn't know where she went to pick up refills after the old pharmacy in Scappoose closed down. He probably wouldn't even remember to take it while she was gone. But she wasn't going to call him about it. He could call her. He had the number. If she called on the first day, it would mean that she was checking in

on him, or updating him on her arrival. It would confirm to him that this was indeed a vacation.

She called Dory instead. Twice on the first day. She made the first call right after arriving that first morning. Bernice had been waiting in the apartment lobby for her sister, sitting in a high-backed chair against the wall, her bags stacked in a row beside her. Men and women were pacing over the plush carpet near the elevators, the men jingling coins or keys in their pockets, the women standing up straight and confident, heads tilted up to watch the numbers above the elevator doors. The security guard, a man older even than she was, sat behind a tall, oak counter beside the elevators nodding to those who came through the glass doors from the street outside. He had helped Bernice lift her bags out of the cab in silence, and then he went back to the desk and sat there looking officious, throwing cold glances in her direction. That was why they called them "guards," she guessed, since that was what they were paid to do: to guard.

Bernice found Dory's cell phone number in her address book and paced over to the pay phone across the lobby. She kept the call short, told Dory she and Bill were separated, and that she didn't want anyone to know, that she would call back again in the evening if she got a chance, that she was fine, and that, no, she didn't want her to go give Bill a piece of her mind.

A couple of weeks ago, Dory opened the hot dog stand on the fuel dock for the annual summer run of Polish foot longs and local sauerkraut. She had painted a new sign for the stand with the name "Let's Be Frank," and hung it on the front of the red and white-striped condiment cart. Dory knew the marina news, at least the news

of found romance, dwindling romance, or lost romance, and what people were saying about it. During the rest of the year, when she wasn't making hot dogs and doling out advice on the fuel dock, people came to her boat to talk.

Dory insisted, with a wink, that she wasn't a chain smoker since she never lit one cigarette off the red coal of another; she always used a lighter to get the next one going. As she puttered around the fuel dock, she lit cigarettes. Sometimes she had several going at once, balanced on the rims of several ashtrays among the tables where she had several different conversations going. Bernice once saw her stab out a cigarette absentmindedly on the top of a fuel pump over by the one official non-smoking table.

You could always count on Dory. She would be on the back deck of her boat or at the hot dog stand. She would be ready to talk. She would be smoking. She would have a can of Red Dog nearby, warming in the sun or gathering drops of rain.

Bernice had only spoken to her a few times since moving aboard. She couldn't stand all the cigarette smoke, and Dory didn't take a shower every day, either, but Bernice watched and listened at a distance. Dory treated everyone the same. Names and background didn't seem to matter. The rich kids cruising through on their speed boats and the alcoholic bachelors at the marina all got the same hot dogs from her at the same price. Dory's sense of equality came across as effortless. If only Bernice could get through the cloud of tobacco smoke to listen and learn, unless it was the kind of thing you couldn't learn but needed to be born with, or the kind of thing that came from ignorance rather than compassion.

* * *

Bernice made the second call to the marina later that first day downtown, after Elizabeth had served her and Jeffrey a quiet dinner of noodles and vegetables with tofu. "Comfort food," Elizabeth said with a half-smile. Jeffrey asked if Bernice needed any money. She shook her head and excused herself to go out for a walk and then stopped at the pay phone downstairs.

The security guard sat behind the counter, his head bent forward. He snored once loudly and then sat up straight, but his eyes soon began drooping again.

When Dory answered, Bernice whispered into the receiver. "Hey, it's me."

A cigarette lighter flicked once on the other end. "Talk to me, sweetie. I'm dyin' here."

"We had a fight," said Bernice.

* * *

Sort of. They had never fought like this before, throwing things, raising their voices, but Bill turned it into a kind of game. Bill could laugh his way out of anything, and he usually got her laughing too.

They were never supposed to stay on the water. That had been their agreement from the beginning. They were supposed to just try it out for a little while in order to save money. "A little while" had come and gone and then Bill had been laid-off and out of work until he had found this recent boat delivery job.

Then, yesterday, after Bill poured treatment chemicals into the toilet on the boat and splashed them all over her one and only evening gown, Bernice just lost it. She had smelled the chemicals and discovered several big holes in the bottom of the dress where they had eaten through. They hadn't used the toilet on the boat in years

since they had turned it into a closet for clothes that needed hanging, the nicer clothes they never wore anymore. Why would he need to pump chemicals into the holding tank when it was empty?

Bill said he was cleaning out the boat a little, getting it ready for the trip to Newport where they would switch boats for the delivery to California. He thought maybe they could go on a short cruise next weekend downtown, visit some nice restaurants before the long trip down the coast. She reminded him that she would have nothing to wear to a nice restaurant anymore and then marched over to the dresser and pulled the boat ignition keys out of the drawer and threw them right out the hatch and into the river and thanked him for letting her in on his plans. She went into the aft cabin for her purse and said she was going for a drive into town to spend some more of her own hard-earned money. Bill strutted over to the key box by the main hatch, pulled the car keys out and threw them outside into the river, too. He even smiled after he did it as if out of relief, or awkwardness. Neither of them had ever done this kind of thing to each other before. They were in uncharted territory.

Bernice started throwing more things into the river: a couple of screwdrivers, his deck shoes, a bag of corn chips, the TV remote. Bill was still grinning and she started smiling a bit too, which made it worse, dissipating the anger she wanted to feel. She turned to face him, narrowed her gaze, and called him William, which only made them both laugh. Bernice had to leave and go for a long walk down the dock in order to stop smiling, in order to call attention to the seriousness of what had just happened.

Later, Bill took the dinghy downstream and came back with a few things that were light enough to float. He even brought back the bag of chips. The boat keys were on a bright yellow floating key ring, so he got those too. The car keys weren't. They were somewhere on the bottom of the river. She spent the better part of the evening searching through the boat for the spare car keys, but they never turned up.

The next day, Bernice packed her bags and stood silently by the door with her arms folded while Bill flipped through the channels on TV. That's when he used the word vacation.

* * *

The security guard was snoring loudly. Bernice told Dory about the fight, about Bill throwing the keys into the river, about how he had laughed at her. "It took me two trips up the ramp this morning, by myself, to get my bags over to the gate where the cab was supposed to pick me up. I don't know what I would have done if someone had seen me. Do people know? Has Bill talked with anyone?"

Dory's lighter scratched over the line. "I haven't told a soul, sweetie, though I think people heard me on the phone with you earlier and know something's up, so yeah, pretty much everybody knows. And pretty much everybody knows that Bill doesn't know they know about it but nobody's saying anything." The lighter flicked again. "To Bill, I mean."

Bernice told her about the insulin, wondering out loud if Bill would remember to take it, wondering if she should call home.

"Listen girl. If you're going to do this, and let him know you're serious, then you need to really *do it* you know? If you don't mean what you say, then who will? You know what I mean? You want me to have Mike stop in and check on him?"

"No, you're right Dory. He needs to know that this isn't some vacation."

* * *

Elizabeth and her husband left for the beach. At night, alone in the unfamiliar apartment, Bernie left the TV on and tried to sleep on the couch. At night was when Bill seemed to need her the most. During the day, he usually had the energy to put a good face on things.

She stayed awake imagining Bill sleeping on the boat without her. She was the one who gave him his insulin shot late at night, after he was asleep. Bill hated needles. He usually slept right through it. It was getting harder to catch him in deep sleep recently since he was getting up to pee more in the night. She lay there waiting, watching his chest rise and fall, his body twitching. Sometimes he would pretend to be sleeping and when she reached for the needle, he would start whimpering or humming a mournful song.

The common bathroom in the upper marina was fifty yards down the dock. He had gotten to where he couldn't make it that far, and he was tired of walking up and down the dock all night. He was relieving himself in the kitchen sink now, and rinsing it out afterward with hand soap. In the morning, she wiped the dry spots of urine from the floorboards and the counter top. It bothered her at first, but not anymore. She didn't say anything about the spots, or the smell in the sink. It was hard enough for him. He usually had a hard time going back to sleep after relieving

himself. If Bernice rubbed his back he would drift off more quickly. Sometimes they would make love in the dark, but more often, they would lie there and talk, sometimes until the sun came up.

* * *

Bernice kept close to the phone on the last day of Bill's insulin supply, in case he called. She turned the black leather couch to face the TV and watched Perry Mason, then Murder She Wrote, then Oprah, hoping to hear the phone ring each time the credits rolled.

Late in the afternoon, the clouds hung heavily in the sky outside the tall windows, almost black along their bottom edges. According to the weatherman, the wind would carry them east before they could drop their rain.

When the drums started pounding somewhere in the streets outside, Bernice removed her glasses and pulled the binoculars from a peg where they hung on the wall by the window. Her sister had called again that morning from the coast to warn her about the protest, but she had already heard about it on TV.

What do you call it anyway, she wondered. A march? A protest? A peace walk? A rebellion? Democracy? What did you call it? Everything depends on what you call it.

Several city blocks were visible through the tops of the trees, and between the buildings, the river hung like a dark ribbon weaving through the city blocks and wrinkling faintly in the light breeze. From the apartment, every time she looked, the color of the river always multiplied the effects of the sky above. The river carried a deeper blue, a duller gray. In the morning, the surface shattered its reflection into a

hundred dancing suns. People paid good money for a view like this; for a view of something they wouldn't want to get close to if they knew how foul and green the water was.

Over by the window, the dizziness came over her with renewed strength. If she got too close to the window, even sitting on the black leather couch to look out, the floor tilted down toward the river, and she had to close her eyes to make it stop. She did OK while looking through the binoculars. If she wanted to see the streets below, she had to walk right up to the windows and look down through the binoculars. During the day, there were people everywhere. The homeless. Businessmen and women. You could tell a lot about them by what they carried, or how they carried themselves, their posture, the quickness of their pace, their confident weaving along the crowded sidewalks. You could even guess their names and probably not be too far off. Some men still yielded to the women, letting them go first off the curb when crossing the street, but mostly, people kept clear of one another.

The drums were getting louder. The streets were strangely empty.

Just below her building, riot police began to arrive. She had to lean into the window to see them. On TV, the news said that police were prepared to use tear gas and pellet guns.

Outside, the sun started to push through the clouds. It looked like the weatherman would be right for once.

Bernice stood up on her toes to better see the street below. She leaned into the glass and waited.

Dozens of riot police climbed out of black vans, pouring out one by one like the impossible number of circus clowns jumping out of impossibly small cars. Clowns. She had never thought of the police in this way. They looked more like clowns pretending to be soldiers. Or ants. Call them cops. Pigs. The Fuzz. She sensed her own perceptions shifting slightly under the different names that came to mind. Law enforcement. Police force. Portland's finest. How strange and laughable they looked through the window high above the street in their tight formations. Toys. They were like toys, or pawns. They fanned out in groups of five or six, lining the intersections along the parade route.

Light began to spill into the streets. The tone of the gray river shifted and deepened into blue. Cloud-shadows climbed from the streets, over the trees and buildings, and then fell back flat onto the pavement again. The pounding of drums came louder through the closed windows and echoed off the surrounding buildings.

Bernice held her breath. The first of the marchers rounded a corner. She lowered the binoculars for a moment. A river of rippling color poured slowly around the corner and over the gray concrete, swallowing the staggered yellow traffic lanes. Her head began to sway. She lifted the binoculars back to her eyes and swept them up the street and away from the marchers to where police on motorcycles passed back and forth across the parade route. Red lights and blue lights spun dimly under the glare of the sun. Several banners waved from open windows high above the street. People leaned out into the air. Heads above and heads below all turned toward the sound of the drums. Bernice watched them.

She paused. Something familiar about the man approaching the march from the opposite direction. His arms hung heavily with a stack of books, shoulders bunched up under the weight of them. At first, she couldn't place him, a face from another world, another life. Her head lightened and her body began to sway – the dizziness coming on even with the binoculars. She pressed her palm against the window frame to hold herself still.

Then it hit her. From the marina. What was his name? The guy always loafing around the fuel dock. Met with the others for coffee in the morning. Fisherman. Sloppy clothes and hair. What was his name? The guy looked exactly like him: the untrimmed beard, the thick canvas pants and flannel shirt, cloth wrinkled into a web of shadows in the bright sunlight. What was his name? The resemblance was amazing. But no. That guy rarely left the docks except to putter around in a rowboat or to go buy booze.

But it was him, even though it couldn't possibly be. He would have just spent the morning with Bill over coffee. Only hours ago. They would have been laughing together. Bill might have even confided in him. Christ, what the hell was his name?

But no. It couldn't be him. It might be his unkempt hair and un-ironed clothes, but he had all those books in his arms. The only thing he ever read was the paper and the tide tables. Everyone knew that. And everyone knew his name. It was on the tip of her tongue.

The guy became even less like himself when he stepped down off the curb and into the river of colorful clothes and banners, his head nodding to the rhythm of the drums, his face smiling. That settled it. There was no way. But she watched him.

There were children there beside him. What were children doing at a protest? And there were older folks in wheelchairs. The man balanced the books in one arm and handed something to a child next to him. No, the child was handing something to him. A woman next to the children seemed to know him.

The soft carpet tilted under Bernice's bare feet and her head rocked violently. The window seemed to fall forward in front of her. She leaned into the glass and a force like a windless wind pushed and pulled her down toward the crowded pavement. She shut her eyes and listened to the drums until the ground felt firm again and then she lifted the binoculars back to her eyes.

The first marchers had moved out of sight. Only the top of the liveaboard's head would be visible now. Where was he? Where were the children? What was his name? Her gaze swept back and forth over the crowd of college students and monstrous puppets, the gyrating dancers and drummers.

She collapsed into the black, leather couch near the window and rubbed both hands over her eyelids. Had he followed her here? Was it really him? Or was the real guy just back at the fuel dock, where he always was, fishing?

The drums stopped. The second hand on the clock above the kitchen counter rolled around the face in a smooth arc. The crowd below roared. Sirens blared. Bernice looked up at the spinning ceiling.

She made her way over to the counter, eyes closed, and reached for the phone. The room tipped again and she grabbed the edge of the countertop. She reached a second time.

The drums sounded again, but sporadically, and then stopped altogether. Or they might have been gunshots. Bernice dialed. Even with her eyes shut tight, the darkness rocked back and forth. When Dory picked up, Bernice tried to speak slowly, tried to calm her trembling voice.

"Dory?"

"Yeah sweetie? You OK?"

"Dory. How can I get back? I can't get back to him. I can't go back on what I said. What are we going to do? Bill and I can't just laugh our way out of everything all the time. If you are really paying attention, you can't just smile at everything."

Bernice held the mouthpiece away from her face, breathing deeply. The noise of the crowd began to fade outside.

Dory flicked the lighter on. "Listen, Bernie. How long are you gonna drag this thing out?"

"What do you mean, me dragging it out? Dragging what out?"

"You know what I mean, Bernie. You're pretending you've really left him, and making it all sound so complicated. You guys are crazy about each other and you know it. I haven't seen Bill crack a smile since you left. Do you know that Bill took your boat out this morning? When was the last time you guys did that? He ran a counter-clockwise loop around Sauvie Island and then stopped by the fuel dock to fill the tanks. He bought a couple of hot dogs."

"But I'm not making it complicated. It *is* complicated. Love and romance isn't enough."

"You might think about calling him, honey."

"Wait, you've been talking to him, haven't you? I can't believe you!"

"Bernie, wait a minute."

"My name is *Bernice*, you got that?" She paused, shaking. "You and everyone else down there disgust me, but especially you, Doris! You and your goddamn hot dogs!"

Bernice hung up the phone and grabbed her purse, letting the door slam behind her. While she was waiting for the elevator, she remembered the man's name. Larry. That was it. That was his name. But what did that matter now? What the hell did she know about the guy?

In the lobby, Bernice felt the security officer's eyes on her as she stumbled out the large glass doors and into the crowded streets where she clipped the sunshades onto her glasses and let the tears fall and no one stopped to ask her if she was OK or even took notice.

* * *

Bill called later that evening. Bernice was waiting by the phone. He asked how the time away was going.

"It's the worst vacation I've ever had," she said.

"Yeah," he said, "we're giving vacations a bad name."

After a long silence, he told her he missed her. He asked her if she would like to go out for breakfast in the morning. He wanted to let her know that he was going to drop the boat delivery job if that was what she wanted. They could even consider moving back on land like they had originally agreed, or at least go out more in the evenings to places on land. He said he was planning to bring the boat down to the

waterfront tonight and walk up the street to see her in the morning if she would have him.

Bernice told him to come on up as soon as he arrived, no matter how late. She would be up.

"You're probably getting more sleep, at least, now that you don't have me keeping you up at nights."

"No, Bill. I'm not sleeping well at all. I've been so land sick."

* * *

Late in the night, out on the couch in the dark living room, Bernie realized that she hadn't asked Bill about the insulin. She made her way out of the guest room and into the living room and dialed home. The phone hummed its calm tone through the receiver. No answer. She hung up and tried again. Nothing. Not even the answering machine. So he really had left, pulled the phone cord out of the jack next to the shore power outlet on the dock. She dialed again and let it ring over and over, holding the phone in one hand and pulling the binoculars off the peg with the other. The phone rang and she looked out over the dark patch of the river by the waterfront until her eyes hurt from the pressure of the binoculars. She hung the binoculars back on the peg. They swung and bumped the wall twice and then grew still. Bernie went over to the couch and listened to the phone ring, switching ears when one of them began to ache, gazing out the window toward the broken line of the river below. She imagined the miles of phone lines and cords that began at the phone by her ear ended finally at the jack by their empty boat slip, the home for their home, where her potted

flowers were still resting along the edge of the floorboards in the dark night air above the water.

After a while, Bernice hung up the phone, put on one of her sister's heavy coats, took the elevator down to the street, and headed down the hill toward the river. Maybe it was the darkness of early morning, or the black roof of the sky studded with stars, or the quiet streets, or maybe the thought that she would be back aboard the boat soon, but when she looked down the hill toward the river, her eyes were steady. She waited for the dizziness to spin the buildings and the streetlights around her, but it never came.

Larry's Journal

If Will and Grace are Joined

Saturday, March 8

Every spring, I am surprised when the gray skies come, and the rain, and I am left longing for the light of the sun. Every spring, I forget what spring is really about here in the northwest, and the clouds weigh heavily and hang about in the mind.

The weatherman says there will be a break from the rain in a few days. No sun, but at least the rain might let up. I got the inboard engine going yesterday. Maybe, if the rain lets up, I'll get the boat ready and head to the Willamette and set her sails, or fish, or just drift and read.

Monday, March 10

These days, I'm like a child, wanting to immerse myself in too many things at once. I found out today that even with a light wind, even at a run, you can't fish for steelhead AND sail AND read at the same time. You end up doing none of them very well. Reading and sailing or fishing and sailing become more like "reeling" and "failing." I almost got clocked by the boom on an accidental jibe. I ducked just in time.

Thursday, March 13

Bought a bottle of single malt scotch on the way from the library today. Savoring it.

Tuesday, March 18

Another war is coming. Or not "coming," really. We're invading again. More boys going somewhere else for reasons too big to make any sense. A big idea like "freedom." Killing for an abstraction, an idea. More collateral damage and more crossfire to be caught in. War. You can always tell when it will happen. Newspapers change their tone to prepare us for the inevitable. Some people on the docks are getting swept up in it, running flags up their masts. Most of us are pretty quiet, though. We've seen too many foreign leaders made up to be bad guys in our time to bite that lure anymore. Always a new face for evil.

Even the fish aren't biting today. I guess if I were a fish, I wouldn't want to see the face of an old man like me either, good or evil.

Friday, March 21

Today was one of those days I'll be trying to make sense of for some time. I went to the library today, and it was open, but barely anyone was there. Not even children. Strange for a Friday. On my way back to the truck, I found out why. The downtown streets were almost completely empty. Television cameras were scattered here and there and the police seemed to have taken over the city. I hadn't known there were that many police in the whole state.

Then I heard the drums. I stopped when I reached Broadway and watched. The protesters began pouring around a corner in the distance, signs and giant puppets bobbing in the air high above them. I walked toward the peace march to get a better

look. Hundreds of faces peered from the windows above. The drums thundered. Several rows of dancers spun long, silky flags and tossed them into the air. Here and there, some of the protesters turned to me and smiled. There were children among them, and elderly folks.

I needed to get back to my truck and they were headed my way, so I started walking in the same direction along the sidewalk, keeping pace with them. And then, I joined them, stepping off the curb and into the street. I walked beside a group of children, their faces painted with cat whiskers, peace symbols, stars and stripes. A young girl pulled on my sleeve and handed me a rock. The rock had a peace symbol painted on it. She carried a small basket of them. A woman, hair in a hundred braids, placed her hand on the girl's head and looked at me. She said something and smiled. I shook my head. I couldn't hear her above the drums. She pointed at the books I carried and gave me a thumb's up. Something cold landed on my cheek. Rain? No, spit from the windows above. The marching was slow. Some people sidestepped to keep in time with the drums. I kept stepping on the heels of the people in front of me and apologizing.

I don't know why, maybe the drums, maybe the singing behind me, or the happiness of the children, or being spit on, or the memories I had of marching for another purpose years before, I don't know, but I was starting to cry. Who knew old Larry could be such a softy? We were going pretty slowly but I slowed down even more and let the children go on ahead of me. I looked around. Long lines of Arab-looking folks were holding hands, and more children and more parents, an old woman with a cane, a black man in a wheel chair, more elderly in chairs, handicapped

children holding knots in a long, colorful rope, all looking somehow like they belonged here. Several people began weaving through the crowd, handing out small slips of paper. One of them carried a sign that said: "poets against the war." A woman older than I was handed me one of the slips of paper, nodded once and then moved on. I read the few lines written on the paper, a poem.

"For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give – yes or no, or maybe -
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep" (Stafford, 75).

After I read it, I felt something roll and flutter in my chest, like another heart starting to beat next to the one already there. Then my stomach fluttered, like there was another heart beating there too. I stepped back onto the sidewalk and picked up my pace, and soon passed back in front of the drums and the dancers and the banners. A large group of older kids behind the drummers were tying black bandannas over their faces. They started to branch off the main group. Police in riot gear stood on the side streets, waiting. I heard shouting and then a roar from the crowd.

When I got back to the truck along an empty side street and shut the door, I stared at the steering wheel for a long time, tapping away at it with my thumbs. I tried to leaf through a couple of books to steady my mind and all the fluttering in my chest. No good. I stared at the steering wheel and my vision began to waver. Dear diary, verily, I say to you: I started crying like a baby in the cab of that truck. I banged on the steering wheel until my hands rang and grew numb. A man in a dark uniform knocked on the side window with a nightstick. A muffled voice on the other

side of the glass. I started the engine and pulled the truck away from the curb. Lucky for him, the guy stepped out of the way. I checked the mirror to make sure he wasn't writing down my plate number. The empty park blocks rolled by. I pulled to a stop by the curb under the tall elm trees and cried some more.

Now the rock with the peace sign rests in the drawer next to the flask full of pearls. Another gift I wouldn't have thought to ask for.

Sunday, March 23

The TV news talked a little last night about the peace march. It seems it is the biggest one Portland's ever had. Thousands of people. There on the screen were the kids in black I had seen, handcuffed and lying facedown in the street. They didn't show the Arabs or the elderly folks or the children with painted faces. The news anchor introduced a political science professor and they started discussing the march. The news man asked what kind of effect the marches in Portland and other cities would have on the decision about whether or not to go to war. The professor said the marches would not have any real effect since they didn't work directly to change policy. The anchor closed the segment after that and a commercial came on and the station bragged about its exclusive footage of the protest.

Policy. So much for the public perception of protests. So much for policy. What are the "effects" that matter? What are the policies that matter? It seems the march had an effect on me. It might even change some of MY policies.

Wednesday, March 26

I'm still getting worked up about the news coverage of the protest. The authority figure said: "The marches won't have any real effect because they won't change policy," as if that settled the matter. I guess I despise his words partly because I fear he might be right. Maybe he is. What difference can a poem or a prayer make in the face of war? What good is penance or absolution for the soldier about to go kill someone else? What good is the whole Catholic machine of written prayers and holy days and rituals when it can fail you in war – in the time we most need it not to fail?

Some priest I would have made. All questions, no answers.

Maybe Edmo was more right than I thought. Maybe mysteries, like the unseen outcomes of prayers or peace walks, are better met with silence rather than heaped-up speculation. That's one thing about Edmo that always struck me. It was enough for him to suggest that there was more going on in the world than we could know. He didn't try to explain what he thought to be a mystery, partly, I guess, to avoid explaining it away. It was enough for him to know that there was beauty and purpose in the world. He didn't seem compelled to possess what he longed for or to possess experiences of the profound. He didn't exert authority over it. It was enough to be grateful in the presence of mystery.

Tuesday, April 1

Another lesson today: In a light wind, it is possible to read and sail at the same time if you look up every 15 or 20 seconds to check on the shore and to watch for

other boats. I broadsided the wake of the Portland Spirit today and slipped on the deck. I've got a big bruise on my shoulder.

Wednesday, April 2

Convalescing.

Thursday, April 3

"Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock: you who yield only to violence, you who force us to work if we would eat.

Blessed be you perilous matter, violent sea, untameable passion: you who unless we fetter you will devour us.

Blessed are you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever newborn; you who, by constantly shattering our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further in our pursuit of the truth...

Without you, without your onslaughts, without your uprootings of us, we should remain all our lives inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant both of ourselves and of God. You who batter us and then dress our wounds, you who resist us and yield to us, you who wreck and build, you who shackle and liberate, the sap of our souls, the hand of God, the flesh of Christ: it is you, matter, that I bless" (Teilhard de Chardin, 63-4)

Monday, April 7

Bought half a dozen more deck pillows and I tied them off in various places along the deck. I went sailing and reading again.

Thursday, April 10

I don't know what made me think I could add pipe-smoking into the sailing activities. Went into Scappoose this afternoon for burn cream and band-aids.

Friday, April 11

I'm trying to stick to either reading, fishing, or sailing. One or the other, not everything at the same damn time. Today, it's fishing from the dock and nursing my wounds with a bottle of port. A monkish beverage.

Wednesday, April 16

I took the boat up the Columbia yesterday. I got to the 205 bridge and the wind died, as it always seems to under that bridge, as if there is a gate there, holding back the wind: this far but no further. I coasted a while with the sails up and then tried to start the engine, but it was flooded. Sometime earlier in the day, I must have kicked the throttle on. (Who designed the damn throttle to be right down by your feet?) I opened the engine up, aired out the plugs, and tried starting it again. It flooded again. I did this over and over until sunset, when the battery finally died. We were dead in the water, only the light wind and the current to push us along. I

decided to head over to Government Island and set the anchor until morning. Tomorrow, I would be at the mercy of the wind.

When Edmo left the marina, he sailed upstream without an engine so I figured I could make do without one too.

I didn't sleep much. It stayed pretty warm outside through the night. The trains went by every hour on the Washington shore. Every time the train whistle sounded, an owl in the trees along the island shore hooted in reply. When I grew too tired for reading, I lay down in the forward cabin and watched the stars through the open hatch and the bats flitting by.

That next morning, I fixed up a pretty good breakfast of eggs and bacon and then brewed a small cup of gritty percolated coffee. The old grounds were dried out but the coffee tasted good. I longed for someone to talk to, to share the coffee with.

Later, once I finally reached the Willamette, the wind died. The short stretch from the Columbia to the entrance of the Multnomah channel took me all day. Luckily, I had Martin Buber and Patrick O'Brien to keep me company. Strange bedfellows.

> "But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me" (Martin Buber, 58).

When I finally I rounded the bend in the channel above Rock Creek Marina late in the night, I saw the lights of the marina in the distance and remembered that I would have to dock into my thin slip in the dark without an engine. I could have

hollered for help, I guess, or tied off to the fuel dock and waited for daylight, but I wanted to do it. Hell, Edmo did it. I could do it too. A million other people managed with sails long before internal combustion. My neck was sore by then from looking up at the wind gage at the top of the mast all day, and from watching the stars spin above the center of the boat as I tacked from one shore to the next. I kept my eye on the wind in the canvas and held onto the main sheet with one hand and the halyard with the other, and kept the tiller balanced between my knees.

I eased her in quietly under sail, spilling wind here and there from the canvas, lowering the halyard as I went. I hopped onto the dock and tied us off with neither a bump nor a scrape. I'm still pretty pleased with myself about the whole thing. It was like inviting a little heaven into the world, or joining my movements to fit a heaven already there, hidden. It was beautiful, really. All of it - my movements somehow joining the cool night air around me. It was graceful when it might have been only hazardous. I got back late so no one saw me docking the boat. An owl or two watched, probably, and the bats heard about it in the changes on the wind, and there were those stars up there, looking down.

Lamp of the Body

Safe Lights

> "Well, it being away in the night and stormy, and all so mysterious-like, I felt just the way any other boy would'a felt when I seen that wreck laying there so mournful and lonesome in the middle of the river. I wanted to get aboard of her and slink around a little, and see what there was there. So I says: 'Le's land on her, Jim.'"
>
> -The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
>
> (Twain, 89)

Even from his perch halfway up the cottonwood tree, Keith had a pretty good view of the whole marina, and he could get up even higher than that, high enough to see the Sauvie Island bridge at the southern edge of the island, and even the spires of the St. Johns bridge where his father worked on the renovation, scraping paint or loosening some massive bolt with a fifty-pound wrench, leaning back into the harness, out over the river, balancing himself by the toes of his boots on the thin edge of a steel beam. Even during the day, spotlights illuminated his father's work from above and below. "No shadows," he had heard his father say once. "When you're up there, you don't look into the lights, not even the sun, unless you want to screw up or fall."

Keith went back to the book he was reading. He read the same paragraph again and then paused.

The school bus would be coming in a while, down the road that snaked along the dike and followed the course of the river, marking the western edge of the island. Every weekday, he waited by the road or up in the tree for almost an hour before the headlights of the bus appeared in the distance and he would slide down the rope well before the bus rounded the last wide turn in the road. Once his feet were firmly

planted again on the shoulder of the road, Keith tied the rope off to a root at the base of the tree, on the river side, where it couldn't be seen from the cars driving by.

Keith read the paragraph again.

From where he was perched, high above the island shore, he could see their sailboat amongst the hundreds of others, their home, just he and his dad's. His eyes followed the path they took every morning in the motorboat across the channel to the flat spot on the shore where his father dropped him off before heading upstream in the direction of the St Johns Bridge for work.

Keith gazed again at their boat, its mast and standing rigging glistening faintly in the sun. No ropes. Only standing rigging. No, not ropes: *lines*. No lines. He could even see his faded-red canoe tied off to its starboard side. Port? No, starboard.

No breakfast again today. If only his father would have let him take the canoe over by himself, he would still be on the boat, eating, watching TV. Food. Right over there on the boat. The boat with no running rigging.

What used to be their main halyard was now the rope Keith used to climb the tree in the morning. No lines on the boat, no sailing. They hadn't taken the boat out for a sail since moving aboard last fall. Not even once, though they came close one Friday evening when his father climbed the mast to try running a new main halyard through the pulley at the masthead and down its hollow center. Without any explanation, his dad grabbed a tool belt and a plastic bag filled with unopened beer cans, and a bosun's chair, and strapped them all to himself, threw some lines over the spreaders, tied the chair to a come-along, and started ratcheting himself up. When he was standing on the spreaders, he worked his way up the shrouds and lashed himself

to the masthead. He was up there for a long time. After a while, Keith yelled up to him several times, but he didn't seem to hear.

Then an empty beer can clattered into the cockpit. Keith walked from the port side to the starboard for a better view of his father's face. The boat rocked under his feet. The top of the mast swayed from one cloud to another.

"God dammit kid! You're flinging me around up here!"

Keith froze.

"Stand still and don't move your damn feet from that spot! If I drop anything, it'll be all your fault."

His father was up there so long that the night began to settle in. Keith still hadn't moved from his spot. His neck hurt from looking up, and it didn't help that the back of his life jacket pressed his head forward. Another beer can bounced off the deck and fell with a splat onto the surface of the water. Keith could just make out the silvery shape bobbing along in the fading light.

When it was dark enough, Keith quietly undid the clasps of the life jacket and set it softly on the deck. He moved slowly away from his spot. Since it was dark, he could ignore that crap about kids under twelve-years-old wearing life jackets at all times. It was a coast guard rule, and a marina rule. Inside the boat, Keith could take it off, but outside, he had to have it on.

Another can clanked several times on the deck near his feet and then rolled into the cockpit. From where Keith stood on the deck, the sky was a deep blue and there were patches of stars up there. Then a flashlight clicked on amongst them. One of his father's hands, ghostlike in the beam of light, held a shimmering can. He heard

a grunting sound and the can landed in the current with a light tap somewhere in the dark just downstream.

Then Keith heard a nervous rustling and clanking. "Son of a bitch," his father said, and Keith looked up to see the flashlight spiraling down toward him. It seemed to spin through the air forever before he felt the sharp blow to his shoulder and heard it bounce from the deck into the water where the beam of light quickly faded on its way down. Keith dropped onto his side, his shoulder humming with pain, his back pressed against the shrouds that rose from the deck to the top of the mast. His father cursed again somewhere in the darkness above him. A new can hissed and cracked open. Keith waited for his father to say something to him about the flashlight, waited for his father to ask him if he was OK, waited to feel something else fall and hit his arm or his foot, or his head. A wrench, maybe, or a hammer. Or maybe his father would fall. Keith reached for the life jacket sprawled on the deck beside him and pulled it over his head and neck. A metal tool clinked against the mast, the sound carrying down its length to the deck somewhere in front of him.

Just three years earlier, when Keith had fallen and broken his leg, his father had rushed to his side, had scooped Keith into his arms, his face wrinkled in horror, tears in his eyes, even. But that was then - a different time. He had been just a kid then.

The man at the top of the mast shifted his weight and pounded hard several times on the masthead with something heavy, a wrench, maybe. "Son of a bitch," he kept saying, over and over. The shrouds shivered where they were pressed against

Keith's back, vibrating against his ribs and spine through his clothing, until they grew still again.

His father must have heard the flashlight when it hit him. Keith must have cried out or made some sound. He must have known. But he didn't say anything.

The next day, the forward cabin where his father slept was quiet. The tools sat in a pile in the cockpit amongst half a dozen empty beer cans. There were still no lines going up or down the mast. The new main halyard hung from the boom in a tangled web of knots.

Keith leaned back into the trunk of the cottonwood and read the paragraph again.

He was hungry, and it would be some time before the lunchroom opened at school. He looked at the cottonwood leaves and wondered what they tasted like.

He heard the bus before he saw it and when he looked down, the long, bright orange shape roared by below. Keith slammed his fist sideways against the trunk of the tree as the sound of the bus faded away.

This wasn't going to sit well with his dad, missing the bus. It wasn't the first time. The school would call home. Or maybe his dad still wouldn't say anything, wouldn't do anything about it besides giving him that look that froze him for the rest of the evening.

He started the paragraph again but only got to the end of the first sentence.

Sometimes his father worked double shifts on the bridge and was gone late into the night. Alone on the boat, Keith picked up the phone and sometimes it was

his teacher, calling again, asking for his parents. If the teacher left messages, Keith erased them. On those late nights, his father came back and closed the hatch behind him and Keith would get up to open it again slightly. Otherwise, the air grew thick and stale inside the boat, and sometimes the smell of beer hung in the air above his bunk, even several cabins away from where his father slept.

Keith usually answered the phone. Even when his father was home. Sometimes his mother called from Salem, but not often, especially after he told her once over the line that she was a complete bitch. She had laughed then, and said that there was too much of his father in him. Their conversations grew shorter after that, just a little talk about what he wanted for Christmas or his birthday, questions about school or what he was eating. It wasn't much, but it was more than even he and his father usually spoke to each other in a day.

Even during dinner on the boat, his dad rarely looked anywhere besides down at his plate, or at the TV. Once, Keith had held his middle finger out at his father during dinnertime, just above the tabletop, for several full minutes. His father never looked up once. Keith brought his hand down below the table when the news came on with a story about a worker on the St Johns Bridge who had fallen and drowned. Keith looked at his dad, who turned the channel and cleared his throat.

"That was Shane. Worked on the east side. Stupid kid with long hair that got too close to a safe light and his hair caught fire. He threw his hard hat into the river and got the fire put out and he would have been fine if he hadn't looked into the damn safe light for so long. If it was going to happen to anybody on that bridge, it was going to happen to him."

The bridge crew called them "safe lights." His father said they were only *safe* as long as you didn't look directly at them.

Keith read the paragraph again. Then he climbed to a higher branch to get the blood flowing into his legs.

The marina seemed to go on for miles. Directly across from his tree, Keith could see the end of the lower marina on the downstream side with the timeworn boat houses and fishing trawlers, most of them abandoned, and then a small home, the old guy's place, hanging on the very end of the marina. It was like a boat graveyard with an old caretaker. There were half a dozen rotting wood hulls and trawlers moldering away, most of them listing to one side.

And then there was the Susan K. Keith had heard about the Susan K from the talk around the marina. It was the largest of the trawlers. It had been slightly renovated by an ambitious new owner who painted the topsides bright red and the trim white, cleaning up the boat from the outside in. Eventually, as the guy worked his way inward, he found most of the bulkheads rotted out, and the engine was worthless. Then he ran out of money, and so the Susan K was abandoned for the second time, the bright red topsides betrayed only by the listing hull. From the island where Keith watched, the boat seemed to flare in the sun next to the brownish rot of the surrounding boats and houses. The name gleamed in black and white letters on the stern. The outward glory of the "Susan K" challenged the stories of its rotten center.

Keith turned back to the book and read the paragraph again. He couldn't get past it. Didn't want to. There was something about it. He didn't want to know what

was going to happen. He wanted to keep the book where it was, keep the mystery there where *knowing* couldn't touch it. The *not knowing* was so much better. Once you *knew*, you couldn't go back to the deliciousness of *not knowing*. Keith knew that. Even on boats you always ended up finding *things,* mere *things,* until eventually there were no *things* left to find.

Keith scanned the horizon when he heard a low, rumbling sound. The grain barge was coming down the channel, massive and powerful. He could feel the hum of the engine vibrating the trunk of the cottonwood. The barge came by every Tuesday and Thursday. Sometimes it came by early enough that he was still in the tree, waiting for the bus. Usually, he was at school, but he could still hear its horn blowing on foggy mornings. In the late hours of the night, the barge would make the return trip empty, heading back upstream. Keith would startle awake, the sailboat rocking violently as the giant wake of the barge rolled by.

Keith put the book in his pocket and stood up on the branch where he had been sitting, holding his body straight and still against the trunk. He peered out from behind the tree. The golden mounds of grain piled high above the water, but they seemed to pass far below him. The pilothouse rose high above the mountains of grain. It hovered by, just about level with the top of Keith's tree. The captain sat in a straight-back chair above a panel of controls. He had a CB mouthpiece in one hand and a pair of binoculars in the other; their lenses scanned the trees on the island shore. They seemed to pause slightly when they came to face Keith, but then they moved on, stopping now and again to focus on something in the other trees along the shore. Searching for osprey nests, probably, or eagles. Keith didn't move until the barge had

made the turn downstream on its way to Astoria. After it passed around the next bend in the river, the pilothouse hung above the island like a car floating along just above the road.

Keith read the paragraph once more, all the way through. Then he slammed the book shut, and tossed it down toward the river. It landed on the surface with a distant thump and hung there for a moment until it finally began to dip under the water. The book wasn't his anyway. He'd taken it from the teacher's desk at school after she read a line or two from it to the class.

Keith scanned the road below, grabbed the rope and rappelled down the trunk. Down the hill from the road on the island side, there were rows of newly sprouting vegetables. Maybe he could find something to eat there after all. Or there was the garage at the farm just down the road, its back doors always unlocked, and there were freezers inside packed with Popsicles and ice cream. Yeah. He'd go there. He was starving. And the sun was blazing hot above him.

He gazed back once more at the river near the island shore. The book was gone.

* * *

After school, and again after dinner every weekday, Keith met Nick and Steve at the top of the ramp in the upper marina where the three of them left their life-jackets behind a rhododendron bush and then wandered into the forest between the channel and the highway just upstream from the upper parking lot.

Nick and Steve had known each other all their lives. Nick had a picture of the two of them sitting on a lawn in their diapers. Nick was a thin boy with a mop of

blond hair who always wore the same soccer jersey with the number eleven plastered across the chest and back. He said eleven was his lucky number, just two ones side by side, and when the number eleven was multiplied by one of those ones, you got eleven again. He said it was a good, solid number he could trust.

Nick could talk for hours if left uninterrupted. Sometimes he went on, describing confrontations between people that didn't even exist. He once told about two older students (who probably didn't exist) at the high school across the street who were at each other's throats over their mutual love for a beautiful blond-haired teacher (who probably didn't exist) with large breasts (which seemed to exist everywhere in Nick's life) until the story really got out of hand, and he said that one of the students had shot the other which seemed to shake even Nick back to himself so that he stopped and reconsidered. "No, wait, that's not quite right, but you should have been there. It was amazing."

Steve spoke out of his long, habitual silence: "Maybe you should have been there yourself, taking better notes."

"Fuck that, Steve. You can't even remember what you had for lunch today much less who the hot teachers are."

Steve was always on the lookout for the perfect skipping stone. He was quiet, but attentive. Even when he seemed to be lost in his rock collecting, he would suddenly interrupt and point out some contradiction in Nick's verbal wanderings. Steve wore the clothes passed down from his older brother, always a little too big or too small. He had recently learned to juggle; he could juggle three things: coins, or wads of paper, maybe, but usually he juggled three small stones. When Keith tried to

convince him to juggle four things, Steve only frowned and shook his head and said, "No, three's plenty."

Steve could skip stones all the way across the channel from the dock to the island shore when he wanted to. Neither Keith nor Nick could even come close. Steve would follow slightly behind the other two, head bent down at the base of his neck so that he seemed to be sleeping on his feet. Sometimes, when Keith found what seemed to him to be a perfectly round, flat stone, he handed it to Steve, who held it up to the light between two fingers and bounced it in his palm before passing it back saying, "Nope. It'll never make it." The others never doubted him when it came to rocks and he never offered them reason to. He could balance larger rocks on top of each other, until he had a stack towering above his head. He had several of these stacks in progress along the river and if they wandered near, he might stop and make it a little taller.

Keith's life at the island school was a complete mystery to the others on the mainland. He could make up pretty much whatever he wanted about his life during the day – girlfriends, crop circles, cattle mutilations, dinosaur remains - and the others could only listen or ask questions. Sometimes Steve would smirk and shake his head in disbelief or Nick would offer elaborations and guesses, but mostly they listened or tried (unsuccessfully) to express contempt for the "hay-seeders" over on the island.

The other kids living at the marina went to school in Scappoose. He would have gone there too, if it weren't for his mom. She had done her research. The homely schoolhouse on the island might do him some good, and she knew it would

piss his dad off to have to drive over to the island every day. She didn't know about their car breaking down. She didn't know about him waiting for the bus, either.

* * *

Just before Keith's first summer at the marina, before school was out, Rich, the marina owner, contacted all the parents of kids twelve and under to make sure they were being supervised for the summer break. To avoid legal trouble and trouble with authorities, he said. So in June, Keith stayed out of sight on the sailboat. His dad told him that if anyone from the office gave him any trouble just to tell them he was thirteen, and that he had been held back a couple of years until he could pass sixth grade. Keith frowned at the part about being held back, but changed his mind when he realized he might be able to ditch his life jacket for good.

At first, Keith stayed inside the boat, but then, he started taking the canoe out for quick paddles down to the fuel dock for candy. In the canoe, he strapped on the life jacket, just in case, but once he got back on the dock, he slid out of it and tossed it back into the boat.

Most mornings, when he went by the fuel dock, there were several old men sitting and talking at a table out in front of the store. They usually paused when Keith pulled the canoe up to the dock. The first few times, Keith practically ran past them, their eyes burning through him. Then the oldest one, Norm, started asking him questions like: "How's the fishing today, captain?" and: "What did you say your line of trade was, young man?" But none of the men ever asked about his age. Norm's gaze was fierce, even when he seemed to be smiling, as if he knew everything Keith had ever done. Norm started inviting him over to sit down while the rest of them

talked and Keith would listen. Then, when they seemed to have forgotten him, he stood up and walked back to the canoe, waving as he went.

The men told jokes, and stories; stories from back before there were life jackets. Norm talked about how his parents had moved to the island a hundred years ago to farm and raise cattle. He talked about people and boats and whole marinas that had come and gone. He talked about Indians and steamboats in the old days, and he looked out over the river while he spoke, almost as if he could see it all more clearly when he watched the water flowing by.

Once, Norm told about a large ketch that sank on the channel a number of years ago. It was a beautiful boat, he said, though it needed some work, but the owner wasn't interested in work. After the salvagers pulled the boat up, they found bullet holes in the hull near the engine room. The owner was trying to collect on insurance.

Keith slipped away from the table and made his way over to the canoe. The sun glared off the surface of the river. A man had shot holes in his own boat? Sometimes the old men just didn't make any sense.

* * *

Halfway through the summer, Keith and his friends were up on land, throwing rocks into the small pools that made up what was left of Rock Creek. Steve's cousin, Jessica, was there, and one of her friends. Nick was rambling on about how he had climbed into his parents' car the night before and driven into Portland. The girls were whispering into each other's ears and rolling their eyes. Steve stood, hunched over, balancing rocks into a stack as tall as his chest.

When Nick stopped to catch his breath, Keith suddenly blurted out: "Sometimes, late at night, I take my canoe downstream and climb aboard the Susan K." Everyone grew quiet. "You have to be careful of the old man that lives in the house nearby," he said, "but if you're quiet, you can get up inside of it. I've seen *Playboy* magazines on board, and guns and ammo and other stuff you wouldn't believe.

Everyone was looking at him. The girls had stopped smiling. Steve picked up a stone and spoke into the silence.

"You know, Keith, I think you're full of shit."

"What are you talking about?"

"If you've been on board the Susan K, and seen all those things, then you should go and bring something out."

"Nick should be the one to show us how he drives a car around at night, that's what! He's the one that's full of shit."

"Yeah, but we know he's full of shit. It's you we're not sure about.

"Hey! Watch your fucking mouth," said Nick.

Steve placed another rock on top of the stack and slowly pulled his hand away. "Let's find out, shall we, Keith? You can show us that bullshit gun you found."

The girls were watching.

"OK, whatever, but not right now in broad daylight. I'll go tonight after dark." Keith heard the sudden bravery in his own voice, the nonchalance, and spoke again just to hear it again. "Yeah, whatever. I'll do it. Like it matters."

They talked it over. Nick and Steve would sneak out after midnight when their parents were asleep and watch from the shore to make sure Keith really did it. Jessica said she'd be there too.

That night, Keith's father went to sleep early. He had worked several double shifts already that week. From inside the aft cabin, Keith could hear the wind howling overhead. The boat shifted underneath his feet. He chose his clothes carefully, black jacket, black pants and socks, his navy-blue shoes. He removed the white shoelaces and replaced them with black ones from his father's work boots. He filled in the gold snaps of his jacket with black ink to avoid reflecting any light he might come across. No flashlight. He would use his own eyes; let them adjust to the dark. When he was dressed, he sat waiting in his cabin, in the dark, breathing slowly, almost imperceptibly, eyes closing and opening until he could see all the light there was in the room. He would become a shadow, stepping lightly, his hands brushing softly on all they touched. He would be there, but not there. He would leave no trace.

Keith glanced at the shoes on his feet. Bare feet would be quieter. He reached down and untied the laces.

* * *

Keith made his way downstream, the current pushing him into the wind, the bow of the canoe slapping into the white-capped waves, the wind roaring in his ears. The moon cast dark shadows on the water. Watery shadows on water, dark streaks on the horizon. Twice, he turned to see the flashlights of his friends bouncing on the shore behind him as the river took him swiftly away. Twice, he lost his balance and

almost tipped over. The canoe slid past the rows of darkened boats and houses, then the trawlers, Norm's house, and down around the back side of the marina between the dock and the shore. The sound of snoring came down wind from Norm's open window. The flashlights flickered through the leaves far upstream.

Keith pulled up to the Susan K and tied the canoe to a ladder that hung from the transom between the large, white letter "N" and the letter "K." Then he placed both hands on the first rung of the ladder. The moon gave the stern letters a soft glow.

He wanted to see everything. He wanted to be unseen, a breath on the wind. His hands seemed to glisten under the moon's gaze. He should have painted them too. He needed to be darker. He closed his eyes and felt the darkness descending upon him, imagining it covering him like a cloth.

Keith held onto the rung of the ladder, eyes closed.

When he opened them again, he felt he could see everything. He could see the leaves moving in the trees along the shore. He looked across to the island and could make out the leaves there too, shivering in the wind. He could see his reflection in the water against the stars and clouds above. He could see that he wasn't afraid.

Upstream, the flashlights slowly approached, dancing sporadically across the walls of the first abandoned boathouses. Soon, they would be on the shore across from him.

The rung of the ladder grew warm under his hands.

If he climbed aboard now, he might find something, or nothing, and he wasn't sure which would be worse.

The flashlights approached through the trees. That asshole Steve and his bitch-cousin. And Nick, the idiot. He could hear them rustling clumsily through the bushes.

Keith reached for the next rung and pulled himself up, scrambling toward the small stern door that led into the ship. To his surprise, the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and slid sideways into the black doorway. As he made his way inside, he thought about his feet, how softly they moved over the deck, and how they no longer felt cold.

Keith stepped into a dark hallway, his hands brushing the soft wood walls on either side. The wind poured through the cracks with its warm breath. The sound of dropping water echoed down the hall. His feet moved swiftly over large cracks in the floorboards. In the first room he came to, his hands moved through cupboards and into closets, into drawers, as if they were searching for what they knew they would find, as if they were remembering. Then, there it was, high up on a shelf of rusted tools: the gun. It was small, made of thick plastic, but a gun. It rested lightly in his palm. A flare gun, but a gun. Here it was, onboard the Susan K, just like he had known it would be. Just like he had told the others. A gun. He would show them.

Back down the hallway toward the stern, Keith found a ladder that ascended both up to another level above and down through a hole in the floor. He climbed. The ladder took him into the pilothouse. He passed through an opening and out onto the upper deck, into the wind, holding the gun by the handle, high above his head.

The moonlight glistened in the trees along the shore. The gray faces of the others looked up at him through the leaves. He could see their eyes. Steve grinned coldly and shook his head.

What the hell did he mean, "no"? What! Not a real enough gun?

Keith, put his finger over the trigger, lowered the short barrel and aimed it at Steve's big, stupid grin. Nick turned and scrambled up the steep shoreline. Jessica grabbed Steve by the arm. Steve gazed up, shook his head once more and then turned and followed the others up the hill toward the parking lot.

Keith cursed and threw the gun with all his strength up and into the wind and turned before it even hit the water, making his way back inside the pilothouse. Down, down, down the ladder, through the floor and into the dark belly of the boat. The air grew thick with the smell of dust and mildew. He could still see his hands, the dull glow of his feet. He needed to be darker. He breathed in the thick air and felt the darkness filling him, filling in the whites of his eyes, filling his arms and chest and legs and down to his feet. He breathed in dark air – and his breath came out in a thick, black cloud.

The metal rungs were coarse under his fingers. At the bottom, the floorboards were moist and rotting under his feet. He stepped away from the foot of the ladder and waved his hands in the air before him. They bumped into something just above his head. A lantern, hanging from a rafter. Moonlight came through windows along the wall beside him. The air in the room was thick with the smell of mildew and rust and fuel.

The dripping sounds he had heard earlier grew louder, and the boat groaned and shuddered below his feet, a deep, hollow sound. There must be yet another level below this one. The moonlight began to illuminate the room in front of him a little, enough for him to make out the edges of a table to one side and a counter to the other. He made his way forward, his hand sliding along the edge of the counter. On the counter top his hands found silverware, knives, a can opener, a small box of matches. He remembered the lantern behind him and put the box in his pocket. He might want some light later on. He could make a home of this place. The numbing smell filled his lungs and his head. He felt his way to a bench beside the small table and lay down, cradling his head in the crook of his arm.

The boat groaned in the strain of the wind. The dripping continued, a sloshing, pouring sound. Strange, there was no rain outside, only wind. It must be the river moving under the hull. Or they were sinking. The river moved beneath him, pulling everything downstream, slowly saturating everything it touched, washing it all away like dirt from a wound.

Keith closed his eyes. The Susan K held no secrets. It was only a rotted-out, old boat. His thoughts drifted lazily through his mind in a dizzying haze, as if they were not his own thoughts, but the boat speaking through him.

Whatever would come, let it come. Let the boat rot away around him. Let the current pull it to pieces. Let it dissolve and let him sink with it to the bottom of the river. Let the whole marina, the whole world, decay and flow into the sea. Let his father and mother find his bones in the wreckage. Beyond their reach. Let them weep over their son.

* * *

Keith could hear footsteps. He knew he was sleeping, but how deeply, he wasn't sure. An acrid smell filled his nose. A voice mumbled softly in the air around him. The dripping sounds continued, growing louder, and faster, like rain, like pouring water, sloshing and splashing. Another voice. And then a light flashed and Keith opened his eyes.

More water spilling and splashing. The sharp scent of fuel or oil in the air. A beam of light passed over the room. Keith froze. Someone was there. His heart began beating wildly. He rolled quietly from the bench underneath the table, his forehead slamming into the edge of the tabletop on the way down. His head began to spin with the pain and the smell. The wood planks of the floor were soft and cold under his feet and hands. He remembered the knives in the drawer. The beam of light passed over the cupboards across from him and two sets of feet stopped beside the table. Keith held his breath. Was it Nick and Steve? Playing some joke?

Something heavy landed on the table above him with a thud.

The voices spoke again, right above him, two men, speaking softly.

"Spooky. She's talking to you, Doug."

"Turn off the damn flashlight, will you? You want someone to see?"

"Let's go. It reeks in here. Time to say goodbye."

One of the men slid the object back off the table with a scrape, and the feet moved away. More splashing.

"Watch your feet, dipshit! That's enough. Let's go."

"Shouldn't you write something in the captain's log? You know, like, 'High winds today, three-hundred knots bearing south-east, and the boat is getting hot, really damn hot.'"

There was the sound of stifled laughter. One of them made his way up the ladder. The other seemed to pause. A voice spoke out loudly. Keith's heart pounded in his ears.

"Goodbye to you, Sue," said the voice loudly, "if you can hear me, if there's any life left in you."

More dripping. The other voice from the ladder up above said to shut the hell up, and the sound of heavy shoes clanging up the ladder faded. Keith waited a moment until he was sure the two men were on the level above him, and then he crawled out from under the table. His feet sloshed through cool puddles in the wet floor. He felt at his forehead and licked the blood from his fingertips. The thick fumes in the air made his head spin. He pressed his temples between both his hands. All the light was gone from the room. The moonlight through the windows had faded. Behind a cloud, maybe. Voices mumbled faintly upstairs. Even the darkness seemed to spin around him. He stumbled into a wall and paused, leaning against it.

He had to think! He remembered the matchbox in his pocket. Maybe just a little light to see by, to help him think. He pulled out a match, and stepped across the moist floor, hands waving in the air, searching for the lantern. If the men were still there, it would be safer to wait, unless there was someone else on board. Unless the guy had been talking to some woman named Sue. No, that was the name of the boat. The ceiling creaked above his head. Voices laughing. Drops raining down from the

ceiling, splashing to the ground in front of him. His heart was pounding. The room was so dark. His hands found the lantern. Maybe he should wait until he knew the men were gone. How long had it been? Creaking upstairs. Maybe he could light the lantern and keep it on low. He pulled a match from the box and shut the lid. No, what was he thinking? Not with all that fuel smell. Not while they were still upstairs.

As he slid the lid of the box back open, a bright flame flared to life somewhere in the dark before him and fell to the floor. The air all around him surged like a gust of blazing wind, and flames poured across the wood floor from the base of the ladder. Footsteps thumped loudly on the level above him and a door slammed shut with a bang.

Keith stumbled backwards away from the approaching flames and fell into an open closet full of coats and rain gear. He pulled the coats tightly around himself. The smell of mildew filled his mouth and nose. The air was thick with the heat. He sunk deeper into the coats, his head pounding, his lungs dry.

His hands passed over his arms and face. No burns. Just the blood on his forehead. His feet were dripping. With water? With some kind of fuel? He breathed deeply but couldn't get enough air. What had he done? Had he really lit that match? The flame had seemed to be falling from the ceiling. What had he done? The coats pressed in around him. He had to get out of here. The men were gone now. Or maybe they would see the fire, and would come back, and see what he had done. Maybe he should wait. Steve and Nick would probably see the flames and go get help. No, they were long gone. He couldn't breathe. He had to get out of here.

The coats! Keith yanked a long, hooded raincoat from its hanger and hunched low, pulling his arms through the sleeves. He could see the orange light of the fire through the gaps in the other clothes around him. It was easier to breathe down by the floor. His hands searched the floor for shoes. Nothing.

Still hunched low, Keith wiped at his feet with a shirt he found on the floor. He couldn't breathe. He had to get out of here, out into the wind, into the fresh air. Keith pulled the hood over his head and stepped out into the room.

The brightness blinded him for a moment, and pain ripped through his feet and up his legs as he dashed toward the base of the ladder. He climbed, his feet slipping on the metal rungs. Keith pulled himself up to the next floor, and quickly dropped to his knees, removing the long coat and using it to pound out the flames. The skin of his feet screamed in pain wherever he touched them. Through the cracks in the wood floor, there was an orange glow coming from the level below. The air around him hung thick with the heat and smoke. Keith dashed down the hall and burst out the back door. He took in the fresh air in short, rapid breaths. His feet throbbed with pain as he crouched low, moving toward the stern. Smoke poured out of cracks in the topside cabin and billowed past him.

His feet glistened a little in the moonlight, smoke rising from them. No, the smoke was rising from the floor of the deck. He ran toward the stern ladder. Smoke began pouring around him in a black cloud, filling his lungs, stinging his eyes.

Keith dropped into the canoe, untied the line and pushed off. The windows on the stern of the Susan K glowed and flickered with a yellow light as he turned the canoe into the wind and paddled hard, making his way downstream. The trawler

disappeared into a cloud of black smoke, the popping sounds of the fire within her barely audible above the wind. Around the back of Norm's house, Keith thought he could still hear snoring coming from inside.

The canoe buckled when it hit the force of the main current and Keith tried to backstroke in order to move the bow upstream. The current and the wind pushed from opposite sides, holding the boat fast on its course toward the opposite shore. Keith moved to the center of the canoe to keep his balance. He dug the paddle into the water and fought to pull the boat around. His arms shook with the cold. His feet throbbed in the small pool of water at the bottom of the canoe. The life jacket rubbed against them and he winced. It was no use. The paddling was getting him nowhere. He was in the hands of the wind and the river now. The marina was receding behind him, smoke filling the air, the windows of the Susan K glowing with golden light.

Halfway across the channel, he saw there was no fighting wind and the river, and he paddled toward the island shore. The cottonwood trees towered overhead along the shore.

By the time the canoe hit the sand along the shore, flames were pouring from the windows of the Susan K. Maybe the fire would stop. Maybe it would rain. Keith left the canoe in the water and rushed up the slope wildly, his arms waving ahead, grabbing at roots and the grass as he scrambled up to the road. He found his way to the tree and pulled himself up the rope.

The wind pressed him into the trunk. The tree swayed back and forth. He looked down across the water from his perch. The flames had spread to several other trawlers. Keith watched the fire move along the dock like a massive arm reaching,

crawling upstream. The wind carried the smoke through the lower marina and up into the trees along the mainland. Light flickered on the wall and roof of Norm's house upwind of the smoke and flames.

Norm. He could almost hear the old man still snoring. Sparks and flames swirled closer and closer to the small house. Several trees along the shore smoked and burst into flame.

The fire was not going to stop. He had to do something. He looked down at the island shore, looking for the canoe, but it was gone. He had forgotten to tie it down. Keith shut his eyes and sobbed into the arm of the coat. His feet cried out whenever he moved. His arms grew stiff and numb. The wind rushed into his ears. Minutes went by, or hours, he couldn't tell. He thought he heard an explosion somewhere down at the marina. His tree swayed - the movements strangely soothing given how far he might fall before he landed in the water, or among the rocks along the shore.

The spires of the St Johns Bridge glowed in the distance.

Keith didn't see the grain barge coming until he heard the horn blow - five short blasts. He opened his eyes. The piles of grain slowed to a stop below him. The beam of a spotlight from the pilothouse illuminated the burning dock. Under the sharp gaze of the light, the color of the flames faded. He searched for Norm's house. Where was it? Lights came on in the houses along the marina.

Keith lowered his head and closed his eyes, his chest shaking with sobs. His feet, his arms, his legs, felt numb and swollen. The wind held him against the trunk of the tree. With his eyes still closed, the world suddenly lit up around him, as if he

were waking from a dream into the light of day. When Keith moved his hands away from his face, the light brew brighter, burning against his closed eyelids, filling his head with a new kind of pain. He held tightly to the tree, turned to face the island, and slowly opened his eyes. The leaves beside him glowed a brilliant white.

Don't look into the light! The thought echoed in Keith's mind. Don't look into the light! He wouldn't do it, he told himself, and he would tell his father later, about how the spotlight had been there and how he had turned and looked the other way.

Larry's Journal

The Dream

Thursday, April 17

Last night, I fell asleep and had a dream. I dreamed that I woke with a terrible thirst. I listened for the usual wash of water on the other side of the hull, but heard nothing. When I lifted up my head, I saw that I was lying along the wall inside the forward cabin, the bed hanging above me, the world turned sideways. The boat lay on its side. I crawled out of the forward hatch, climbed up the deck and with the help of the rigging, slid down the slick surface of the hull to the dock.

The river was gone. The stringers were half sunk into the mud. The silted walls of the shore rose above me on either side like a massive culvert. Pilings rose from the mire up high into the air, their tops catching the light of the sun above what used to be the shoreline. Boats and houses rested on the mud in their rows. Masts criss-crossed each other on down the line of the dock. No pools of water. Only mud. It was gone. The river. The waterline. All of it.

There were shapes in the mud all around. I began to recognize them: TVs, a bicycle, a motorcycle, a car, a gramophone, the broken hull of a boat. Then I saw bones sticking out of the pasty muck, and strangely shaped skulls – some human, some horse, some cattle and others, longer, bird-like. One pile of bones moved. No, it was a fish rolling in the thick clay. The creature shook violently and then grew still.

A horrible stench hung in the air that I could not smell. I could see it, swirling like a mist that stung my eyes, feel it pushing me back when I tried to move down the dock. It occurred to me then that I might be dreaming.

No water. No wind. I thought: *tidal wave*, *tsunami*. But so far upstream? No, the river had dried up or washed away. Where was everyone else? I began to run, pushing through the thick, foul air. My feet thumped on the wood dock in a strange, solid tone. I pounded on the doors of several homes and shouted. Water and sewer lines had pulled away from the main lines up above, but no water came from there either. I knocked on the door of Norm's house and then rammed my shoulder into it several times until it broke open. Norm sat in his chair, his head drooped down over a dog. It was Skookum, draped over his lap, only the dog was a large, black setter - Skookum, but the wrong breed - her black hair matted into dark, muddy clots. A gash hung open in her neck. A dark patch of dried blood stained the floor in front of the chair. A jagged knife rested at my feet, its blade darkened with dry blood. Norm looked up, his face puffy and yellow. Tears came from his eyes, the first sign of moisture I had seen. I wanted to catch the tears in the cupped palm of my hand and drink. I began to shake with thirst.

Norm's bloated body was a dull gray, the color of the mud outside. He ran his hand over Skookum's fur, rubbing behind her ears. Then he spoke - his voice but thin and cracking, fading to a whisper.

"I tried, Larry. I tried to save the river, but I couldn't do it. I tried to save them, but now everyone is gone. We'll be gone too. Soon. Very soon. It is time."

I was so thirsty. I tried to speak. My tongue folded like dry leather. My lips cracked and split and I longed to feel the moistness of blood dripping into my mouth. I bit at my lips. I opened my mouth wide until my lips split open in several places. No blood came.

Then two things began to happen at once: the sound of trickling water came through the open windows from outside and Norm reached behind the chair and pulled a shotgun out by the barrel. The trickling sound turned to pouring. Norm pointed the barrel of the gun at me. I held up my hands and tried to scream, tried to tell him that the water was returning outside, but no words came.

Norm nodded his head as if he thought we had come to some agreement. He clicked the safety off. I waved my hands in the air in front of me. It was a mistake.

He spoke again, his voice a whisper. "I've got two rounds left, my friend. One for you. One for me. I'm so sorry. I tried to save us." He wiped at his tears and then leaned the stock into his shoulder. The water roared now somewhere just outside the walls. Norm sighted down the barrel at me.

"Goodbye, Larry," he whispered.

The house lurched and the water came crashing through the windows on the upstream side and Norm fired the gun into my chest.

I sat up in my bunk, breathing hard, my heart pounding, my mouth swollen with thirst. I reached for the glass on the counter by the bed and took in long gulps of water.

I couldn't sleep after that, so I climbed up on deck. The night air was warm. The clouds hung low, holding in the heat. I sat down in the cockpit and threw in a baited line as if to search for life under the water. I sat there for hours. No bites. No snags. Nothing. *Tohuw wa bohuw* under the surface – formless and void – darkness under the face of the deep. While I waited through the watches of the night, searching with line and hook for some sign of life under the water, strange shapes seemed to move in the air above the river, dark forms like clouds of smoke or fish bending their tails and moving soundlessly through the air, through the rigging above my head, riding on some windless current right through me. I sat there, watching the river go by, above and below the surface, it seemed, until the movement of that other strange world grew still and the breeze died around me and the sun came up over the island like a silver trumpet.

Flames

It was getting late. The stars outside the car windows were as bright now as they would get. The wind pressed into the car and leaves struck the windshield with light, ticking sounds like giant raindrops. Chris rolled the window open a crack, and the wind pulled the smoke outside. Sarah took a long drag on the cigarette and then reached over to put it, coal first, into Chris' mouth.

"Hey! That was actually hot! Why would you do that? I'm serious! I could bust my head through this window; my heart is so full of you. I would do anything, everything, or even nothing if you wanted me to. Tell me something to do."

"That's poetic of you, but I can't tell you what to do. That's the kind of thing you have to come up with on your own. If an idea comes to my mind and I tell you, then it doesn't come from that full heart you keep talking about."

"You're so fucking brilliant, you know that? Can I start calling you honey?"

"No. My dad calls me 'hon.' It's too close."

"Can I start calling you Gandalf, then, 'cause that guy *so* rocks, you know? No? You know what I would do so you would know how much I love you? I would throw myself in front of the next train that goes by right on those tracks over there. I would run down that hill and throw myself in the water and then save myself from drowning. I would even quit my highly successful job and apply to a certain university on the other side of the planet."

With High school behind them now, everything was different. They had been together for more than four whole months. By the last few weeks of their senior year, Chris was making more money working part-time at the paper mill down the road in

St Helens than most of his high school teachers could earn teaching. Sarah was already in the process of leaving, in some ways - reading ahead in the required texts for her upcoming classes, reading this and that, always reading. She had even brought a small paperback book along tonight. Something called *The Lives of Girls and Women*. She had read several juicy lines out loud, and would have kept reading, but Chris leaned over and started kissing her on the neck.

Sarah reached up and flicked ashes through the crack in the window. "You're an idiot, you know that? Plus, it's too late to apply. The deadline was ages ago."

"I would be the most idiotic idiot for you."

"What's that?"

"An idiot. I could start drooling on a regular basis."

"No, you moron. What is *that*?"

"We could take the same classes and I would raise my hand and just keep saying your name whenever the old professor called on me. 'Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. What light through yonder window breaks? It's Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. At the prick of noon. Sarah, Sarah...' Where are you going? What are you looking at?"

"That light over there. See? It's bright as a spotlight."

"Oh, yeah. They might be making another movie down there on the dock. Someone made a movie here last summer and kept spotlights on all night for like, a whole week shooting some night scene. Are you like, even listening to me? I tried to be an extra, but it was a night scene and everyone was supposed to be asleep except two people chasing each other down the ramp and around the dock. You're not even listening. You wanna go be in a movie?"

"No, it's a kind of fluttering light, like a fire. I think it's a fire."

Chris propped himself up and looked through the side window.

"Shit, I think you're right. There have been like, two fires on the channel this summer. You wanna go see it?"

"Go see it? We should go call 9-1-1 or something."

"Yeah, let's go. I don't hear any sirens or anything. There's a pay phone at the top of each ramp."

They both lurched, hands and fingers working clumsily over clasps and cloth and buttons and shoelaces. Sarah held the front of the collar under her chin and whipped the back over her head. She pulled her hair through. Chris opened the door. Several coins rolled out of his pants pockets and clinked onto the grass beside the gravel road. Sarah climbed out first, pulling her shirt the rest of the way on. The wind pushed into them like a warm hand outside the car. Chris still fumbled around under the seats.

"Where is my shirt?"

"I don't know. Hurry."

"I can't go down there without a shirt."

"Your coat's in the back."

"Pretty warm out for a coat."

"I'm not waiting, Chris. C'mon, there are people suffocating and burning up down there, you'll need the coat for protection so you can burst through the flames to rescue everyone for me. C'mon!"

Chris pulled the coat from behind the back seat, stepped out of the car and began to feel for the coins in the grass at his feet. Sarah pulled him up by the arm.

"Come on, already!"

"Why are we whispering if there's a fire?" Chris asked.

"Maybe there isn't."

"If it's a fire, I'm going to put it out just for you. If it's not, I'm going to start one for you."

"Come on, Superman. I'm leaving."

She ran swiftly through the grass along the dirt road, Chris following close behind, coins rattling against his leg inside the pocket. When he caught up with Sarah, he reached for her hand, locking his fingers in hers, one or both their hands sweating, he couldn't tell which, their feet evading each stone and branch they came to. Along the shore above the middle marina, there was no mistaking the caustic scent of smoke riding on the wind. Chris squinted his eyes into slits. Sarah pulled her collar up over her nose. Between the leaves of the cottonwoods lining the shore, the horizon danced with a yellow, wavering light.

* * *

Sarah skidded to a stop by the pay phone above the lower marina ramp and Chris bumped into her, pushing her off balance. He pulled at her hand to keep her from falling, and then pulled her into an embrace. Sarah's eyes sparkled. Her hair hung golden. Her arms reached for him, soft in the wavering light. Chris' coat hung unzipped, his chest and stomach hidden in dark shadow. She reached in, placing both hands on him. He put his mouth on hers. He worked a lump of coins out of his

pocket, the flavor of her in his mouth and in his nose. He kissed her, teeth clicking into teeth, his tongue pushing into her. He fumbled for one of her hands, placing quarters and dimes and nickels and pennies into it. She pushed hard into his chest with her other hand. He stumbled back. Her face was grim. She looked away and said, "Go. You don't need coins for 9-1-1."

The ramp pounded under his feet. She dialed the numbers and watched him run into the smoke, listening to him screaming warnings about the fire, loud and then louder. The phone clicked and the dial tone came on again. "Shit!" She dialed the numbers again.

* * *

Past the end of the covered moorage, the smoke churned and foamed like a warm river. Chris reached out with his hands as if to push against it. He could no longer scream out warnings, or even talk or breathe. He closed his eyes and felt for the edge of the dock with his foot. He walked sideways. His foot bumped a dim light just above the floor of the dock that illuminated only the gray haze around his feet. Orange light flashed through the clouds of smoke. He needed to breathe. Chris leaned over the edge of the dock, his face inches above the water, searching for pockets of air. He breathed. The flavor of her was already gone from his mouth. He heard the rush of flames that poured their heat like water down the wind. He breathed. Then he remembered the old man that lived at the end of the marina beyond the abandoned boats. What was his name? The old guy.

Chris breathed again, inhaled smoke and began to cough violently. He pressed his palms into his eye sockets and leaned over and breathed again.

Something splashed and hissed on the water nearby. He looked under the layer of smoke, down the dock, over the surface of the river and saw yellow flames on the water. A wave brushed against his cheek. He held his breath and pushed his head into the water. He sat up and dipped his feet in, then legs, then arms. One last breath of the cool air above the surface and then he stood, zipped the coat up over his head and peered through the collar. Water rolled down his chest, stomach, pants, genitals, down his legs. Socks squished out water. Wind and smoke pressed warm through the clothes, onto his cool skin. Chris shivered and ran into the fire.

* * *

Sarah saw Chris before he saw her.

She was pacing through the parking lot at the edge of the crowd when she noticed him and paused. He was sitting on the grass over by the back of the ambulance. His coat was gone. She watched from a distance as the paramedic draped his hand over her forearm, fingers pressing his wrist. The woman wrapped a blanket loosely over his shoulders, put an oxygen mask over his mouth and brought his hand up to hold the mask in place. Then she picked up a black bag and walked toward the crowd. Chris let his empty hand drop onto the ground, palm up, fingers loosely curled, blades of grass springing up between them one by one. His hair was pressed against his scalp; his pants and shoes still hung dark with water.

He started to lift his head.

Sarah looked over at the crowd, at the river, the water from the fire trucks streaming in arcs through the air, the smoke still pouring from the sparkling embers.

She could feel his gaze on her. She looked back again over the crowd. The coins still hung warmly in her palm. She reached up and placed her free hand over her mouth.

* * *

When Chris looked up from where he sat in the grass by the back of the ambulance, he saw Sarah looking for him. Her eyes were scanning the crowd, flitting back and forth. One hand reached up, the fingers worrying over her mouth. The other hung at her side in a rounded fist, still holding the coins. One of her shoes was untied. Her shirt was black, small. The bottom edge hung slightly above the waistline of her jeans. There would have been no room in those pockets for coins.

When she finally turned and saw him, her shoulders dropped and she moved the hand away from her mouth. She hurried over to where he sat. Lights rolled red and white and red again over her eyes and mouth and arms. Her face was white, placid. She didn't look him in the eyes. Coins clinked into the grass. She collapsed beside him and pressed her face into his neck under the chin. Chris tried to push away, to meet her gaze, but Sarah held fast to him.

Chris tilted the oxygen mask away, speaking softly to her.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to dedicate my idiocy to the love of my life: Sarah."

He put the mask back over his mouth, breathing deep. She wrapped her arms around him and the blanket fell from his shoulders. Some of her fingers were cool on his skin; others were warm and moist, smelling of copper. Her breath was warm on his neck. He felt her voice vibrating on his skin. "You smell like smoke. I heard you saved him."

"You smell lovely. I didn't save anybody. You OK?"

"I could use a cigarette, but I'll wait."

"That would be kind of you."

Chris watched his hand move through the hair on the top of her head.

"Your parents are looking for you," she said.

"Let them not find me for a minute. I didn't save him. More like he saved me."

"I guess you're going to live, then, huh?"

"I wouldn't call it living. I'm going to have to miss you now."

Chris set the mask on the bumper of the ambulance and coughed violently.

Sarah reached up and placed her hand over his mouth.

Larry's Journal

Watchfulness

Friday, April 18

Most people secretly want to see Armageddon approaching on the horizon. Exhilaration and horror are like two twin brothers. Even the memory of the dream I had the other night makes me feel more alive for all the death it carried. Why is this?

In the days before the turn of this century, during the Y2K scare, you could feel the exhilaration and horror of the unknown even here on the river. People started showing up on their boats with food and supplies, bottled water and bibles, guns and ammo, ready to let loose the mooring lines and drift away from the chaos that didn't exist, except maybe inside themselves. Even when the newspapers started suggesting that the Y2K fears were unfounded and that government tests of computer systems had shown little or no danger, you could still feel that people wanted it to happen. You could see folks at their worst, then. Even I entertained wild scenarios in my mind: fleeing out to sea, or being forced to kill in order to protect myself. Most people seemed unwilling or unable to hold those dark desires at bay, to keep their minds in check. Protect you and your own - it's the American way. Life inside a disaster movie is an exciting thing. Violence feels like such a life-giving force. We're Americans, by damn. God forbid we ever get bored.

Then, after 9-11, we all deepened our doubts in each other. Even here on the river, people started peering more through the windows at strangers and even at friends, looking away most of the time rather than waving, rather than stopping to say

"hello." The impulse for me even now is to stay inside rather than walk under unseen gazes.

Recently though, I've started my own little protest, a patriotic one, as I see it. I'm walking outside more, smiling at folks until my face hurts. Some have started waving back again.

Not too long ago, Rich posted a notice on the front door of the fuel dock and on all the bulletin boards around the marina, a notice that the Coast Guard had sent around the river warning citizens to pay increased attention to suspicious activity on the water. Great. Like we need the encouragement to be more guarded. We're all so damn suspicious-looking down here, we odd folks who carve out our lives on the water. Is there really a need to call for greater vigilance out here in Scappoose - the Multnomah channel - the armpit of the Columbia River basin? A governmental notice like that makes a guy like me look even stranger, makes me feel even more ineffectual, more lonesome.

Late at night once, I went around to take down those Coast Guard notices and burn them in the stove on my boat – more of my own small local protest - but someone had beaten me to it. Norm, probably. I felt a little less lonesome after that, but no less like a strange social problem, like someone who it is your national duty to keep an eye on. Easier to keep a suspicious eye on someone, to look for the bad, rather than bother with trying to call the good out of them.

We are afraid, all of us. Fear. It's like our national bird. Our national flower. Our national spiritual crop. The sum of all our ambitions.

Authority might directly oppose fear, keep it in check, rather than just fighting the objects of fear, however real or clearly imagined they might be.

And fear erodes authority. That's it. Fear of finding out that I have nothing to offer, or that it won't matter if I do. Or even worse, that I do have something to offer, and that I have been called, and that I have failed that calling. The abandoned city of God within me. The city overrun, now become a city of little safety and no peace.

More walking the docks and smiling like an idiot seems called for today. It is my feeble response to these things I have written. It's not much, but it's not nothing. There are a lot of folks down here fishing off the docks these days. Fathers and sons trying to figure out what kind of bait to use. Better go keep an eye on them.

Saturday, April 19

The Coast Guard forms went back up yesterday, but they disappeared by this morning. I asked Norm about it. He just winked at me and said, "Larry, what signs? You starting to see things?"

And I said, "Oh, just signs of the end of the age, that's all."

And Norm looked at me and said, "Goddamn right," and I felt then that I was talking with an old friend, or a brother maybe. Tears started pooling in my eyes, right there in front of him. I turned to face the river, and I could feel Norm's eyes turn, too, and we both looked out over the water in silence.

Some Fixed, Living Thing

Norm tried to move the rocker over to the window and almost tore his spine to shreds in the process. He brought a lawn chair in from the deck out back on the downstream side of the house instead and sank into it by the window. It was already open. Only a couple of inches. Not too far. The width of a gun barrel.

Outside, the surface of the water moved. He watched for several minutes while it flowed by under the hot sun. Then, the haze of the river seemed to hang there before him. It was his house that suddenly appeared to drift upstream. The far shore was a shimmering blur. The grass above the banks fell and rose and fell again in the wind. The leaves in the cottonwoods closed and opened their eyes. Bright patches and darker forms moved over everything. Not that he could see the grass, the leaves, or the water, really, but he could see the wind. That was enough. The wind showed him what the grass and the water were doing.

Skookum sniffed at the shotgun where it leaned against the wall beside the window. In case someone went by, Norm didn't want it out in plain view. Yet. Unless. Unless what came along was that sleek fucking red speed rig that flew by most mornings, kicking up a wake that washed over all the stringers along the marina, splashing the siding, putting strain on docking chains and pushing one house into another, stressing the saturated wood and otherwise pissing him off with that arrogant presumption of the entitlement to go as fast, be as fast, as a goddamn bat out of Hades.

Skookum waddled over to the door and barked. Norm barked too. Told her to shut the hell up. The dog crawled under the cool, iron, wood stove, the coolest

place in the house, probably, on a hot day like today. Lucky dog to fit under there. She poked her head out from underneath, where a thin line of ash marked the floor between the front feet of the stove. Skookum rested her head on her paws. Several powerboats trolled by in the choppy water.

Norm waited for him, the young guy in the red speedboat. Norm had waited yesterday too. But the guy never came. Or he maybe he came after Norm fell asleep in the chair. Norm was waiting again today. This time, he'd stay awake. Just a warning shot off the port bow should be enough. Enough to make another kind of speedy point about how to behave on the river. A slow-the-fuck-down-you-motherfucker-before-I-pull-a-Jesus-Christ-and-walk-across-the-water-to-take-the-top-of-your-little-shit-head-off kind of warning. A wake-up call. Just a little reminder, young man. A reminder that you're damaging property, and the fragile shore line, and the burrows and homes of countless animals who have dug out a life along the water. A reminder that the rest of the world moves gracefully or sits still all around you and your goddamn speediness. A reminder that all of creation knows how to be still at the same time that it spins faster than you can think. And you miss it for the short-lived thrill of almost shitting your pants while you roar down the river making your passengers say "Wheee! Faster! Faster!"

Last week, one of the trawlers jerked loose when the wake came rolling by. A line snapped and the thing swung around and just about smashed Norm's house into kindling. That was it. Time to get British and start throwing cannonball messages over the water. He checked the chamber on the gun again with a click. The dog lifted her head. Just one shell. That was all he'd need.

Norm waited.

He hadn't bothered to leave the house in several days. Not even to meet the others for coffee in the morning. There were no others. No one was around. Even Chad was gone, sailing off to who knows where. He'd heard Bill and Bernice might be back from their little trip to California. No one else who drank coffee in the morning stuck around for long. Edmo. Gone. And Larry. Larry was gone. No idea if he was even coming back. Norm went to visit him in the hospital after the heart surgery, but the place reeked, and Larry wasn't up for talking much, so Norm left pretty soon after he arrived. Larry looked pathetic in his thin little gown and Norm told him so, told him he looked like a damn Old Testament prophet or something. Larry had a rich cousin back east who was sending for him, gonna make sure he was taken care of while he recovered. Larry gave Norm the keys to his boat. He said there was a notebook on board that he wanted Chad to have. Made it all sound so final even though he said he'd be back on the water before the winter set in. On his way out of the hospital building, Norm got lost in the maze of hallways. Some nurse stopped him to ask if she could help him back to his room. He turned away from her and got the hell out of there before they tried to strap him down or check him over or something.

He hadn't made his rounds through the marina in several days. No one seemed to notice. After a glance in the fridge this morning, he knew he'd have to float on up to the store later today for beer. He'd been laying off the Black Velvet recently and making up the difference in beer. And he ate less these days. Without beer in the fridge, the house felt even emptier, hollow. A trip upstream to the fuel

dock seemed to be in order. Depending, of course, on what happened after the bright red speedboat rounded the corner on its way downstream.

That fucking speedboat. Going by nearly every day like there was no tomorrow. Guy probably never worked a day in his life. Spending money his mommy and daddy broke their backs to make so he could waste it on his passions. No discipline. No restraint. No control. Only excess. Part of the larger failing of the old ways of integrity and fidelity that went hand-in-hand with being on the river. The houses, the boats, the marina, the whole world was coming apart. The end of something was near. The end of some chapter in history. Or maybe it was all over long ago and this was the chaos of empty space after the final pages of history have turned. There were signs of the end, whether the end was coming or had already gone. There were rumors of a never-ending war. A new kind of peace and safety in the air that actually smelled more of panic, of fear. Everybody seemed to just go along with it. Even Rich was considering mounting fake security cameras at the top of all the ramps to make a point. The end of peace. The end of history. Norm could see a whole new book of history beginning to unfold. He could smell it. And who gives a shit about what has been lost as long as you can go faster and faster, defying the elements and everything and everybody? Going as fast as you can so you can't see the damage, the flotsam, abandoned hollow shells of what once held life and importance, the damage that's everybody's fault and nobody's fault at the same time. Time and damage and erosion along the shoreline. Eventually, the banks would collapse and the river would be everywhere, the railroad tracks would tumble into the water and history would be forgotten in the pressing pace forward to some end we

know not. Some endless nightmare. Nothing back there in the past that we aren't already bored with. All that's left is the stuff we just don't know about yet, though we won't stop long enough to look it in the eye once it arrives. Soon no one would remember that there were even eyes in our heads to look with, to look into each other's eyes with. To know that it is possible to meet the gaze of some fixed, living thing and to yield to it, to stop and notice it.

Not even the river would remember Norm being here in the new pages of the new history, his life and home suspended in the current, right here, hanging onto a few sticks that he helped pound into the river bottom ages ago. Houses and boats were slowly being wrenched to pieces and there was no way to guard any of it anymore, no way to keep watch, to protect, to honor, and no one left to guard what needed guarding anyway, even if you could. And those fuckheads flying around in speedboats didn't see any of it. Probably, they couldn't see even if they tried. But he had to try. Even he could feel himself falling asleep to what mattered. Dull to the essentials. Hazy on the details of the only things worth remembering. He had to try. He had to do something.

Norm heard the hum of the engine before he saw the boat coming. The gun still leaned against the wall. He tipped the barrel away from the wall until it bumped heavily against his rib cage. Then, with both hands, he hoisted the gun up and anchored the stock into his shoulder. Skookum's eyes rolled in his direction, her head still resting on her paws. Norm slid the barrel through the gap in the open window and pointed it upstream.

A red shape moved over the water, white foam trailing in its wake. Norm clicked the safety off and sighted down the length of the barrel. The boat came faster. He waited, deciding to hold off until the speedboat reached a spot downstream of the marina. That way, the shot would land in the water, mostly out of sight from the dock.

The boat came on, a red blur, parallel with the lower marina now. Norm imagined the guy behind the wheel, his hair blowing back in the wind, a smile on his face perhaps, totally and completely oblivious. The face of oblivion comes with a smile, Norm thought. The engine roared. The boat moved past him at an impossible speed and Norm placed his finger lightly over the trigger.

A flash of light downstream caught his eye. He turned to see it: a sailboat tacking toward the opposite shore, the sun suddenly shining off the white canvas. Chad's boat, maybe, on its way back from Astoria. Norm took his finger off the trigger. The red speedboat swerved to miss the sailboat, and continued downstream until it went around the bend. Norm pulled the gun back inside and laid it to rest on the ground next to the wall. He watched the bright blur of sail in the distance and tried to remember what kind of boat Chad was sailing. When the sailboat reached the wake of the red speeder, it rocked violently, the mast whipping like a fly rod. Then it tacked back in Norm's direction. Norm stood up, went to the door, and stepped outside. Skookum got up and followed him out onto the back deck. The wake hit them then, crashing into the stringers, all the way up to the siding, pouring over the deck. Norm held onto the railing. Skookum was swept off her feet. She went down, rolled once over the deck like a small fire log and stopped just before she reached the opposite edge. Downstream, the waves pounded into the shore. The sailboat moved

closer, straight for him. Norm leaned back, still holding onto the rail. At the last moment, it tacked, and the sunny face of a young man looked up. But it wasn't Chad. Some other kid. The kid waved and shook his head. As the young man wound the jib sheet around a deck cleat by his foot, he shouted, "Some wake, huh?" Norm nodded and waved back.

Skookum shook the water out of her fur and hopped onto the skiff. Norm looked down at her. "That's right, Skook," he said. "Smart dog. Time to fill that empty spot in the fridge."

At the fuel dock, Rich was on the phone. Norm helped himself to a half rack and set a ten-dollar bill on top of the till. Back home, he fell onto the sagging mattress, opened three cans of beer at once, stacked them on an end table by his rocker, and started drinking.

* * *

When he woke, it was evening, and the sun was setting over the hills. The river had passed into shadow and the top of the bank across the water blazed with golden light, the grass and the leaves rippled brightly and all the more so with the deep, gray clouds that hung on the horizon behind them. The grass quivered for one brilliant moment, and Norm looked away. He went over to the fridge and pulled out several more cans. When he looked out the window again, the light had passed above the bank, slipping up out of the blades and reeds. Even the lowest leaves in the trees were smothered now, joining the black clouds behind them. The carbonation burned his throat on the way down. Norm staggered over to the bed and rolled onto on his

side and let his face sink into the pillow. To see the sun fall away and the light in the trees. He just couldn't watch it. Bad enough to know it was happening.

Norm placed his palm on the cool surface of the wall beside him. The wind coming in the window above was still warm, but the warmth would soon fade. He gazed at the wall around his hand, the house he had made with his own hands still there under his palm. Years ago, at another dock downstream, he had built this wall. He had scraped the thick, plaster over the wood paneling, smoothed it out and waited and watched it dry. Wet shapes on the wall slowly receded over the hours and days. He painted it. A sealant and two coats. Ten years later, he painted it again. Now, there were small blisters in the layers of paint. Little bubbles under his fingers. This one spot underneath his hand was his own. The spot began to warm under the heat of his palm, as if some of his life were seeping into it, or already there, meeting the touch of his hand. That spot was his home if ever there was one. He would remember it when it was gone, or if it lasted, it would remember him. It was his greatest work, really: remembering. To preserve a place, to guard it, was to remember it. He remembered that this wall had never really lined up properly. It was up on blocks and shims to bring the top edge level with the others. It had almost fallen into the river before he could tack the top corners to the rest of the frame. He'd thrown a hammer into the water out of frustration with this wall.

Norm drifted to asleep again remembering the things he had thrown or dropped into the river over the years, watching them fly from his hands and hang in the air above the surface for their final exhilarating moments of life in the world above, or watching them land and float along on the surface of the water while

gravity poured them down the rim of the world: clock, propeller, engagement ring, TV, seized-up outboard engine, burnt pot roast, dog shit, chewed up copy of Hemingway, revolver, bible, telephone, reading glasses, frying pan, dead light bulb, the lampshade, the lamp stand, wrist watch.... Norm saw his own body flying in an arc through the air over the water, saw himself as a boy tossed from his father's arms, from the back of a large boat, his hair and clothes aflame. Norm had found a gas can, and was dropping fuel-soaked rags into the river and lighting matches and tossing them at the floating bundles when it happened, when flames rippled over his clothes, wouldn't go out. Rather than rolling him over the deck to put out the fire, his father cursed and scooped him up and tossed him over the side, through the air, into the cool water. Norm pushed back up through the surface to see his father's stern face looking down just before it turned away and then he saw the life preserver spinning in the air above him.

* * *

When Norm woke again, the cracked ceiling raged with an orange light. White flakes like snow danced above his head. Skookum was barking. Norm reached a hand up into the light and saw more white flecks hanging on his arm. When he brushed at them, they smeared like chalk. Or ash. The black web of cracks on the ceiling wavered, darker, sharper, more jagged than he remembered in the harsh light. He listened to Skookum barking. It was like the dog was trying out new words, new rhythms in the blazing night air. "Bark-bark-bark. Bark. Bark-bark. Bark-Bark-Bark-Bark-Bark.

That he hadn't leaped to his feet yet surprised him, seemed to stun him into further immobility. He could smell the smoke. He reached his hand out for the spot on the wall again and saw his own wavering shadow, the shape of a man reaching up from his own pyre.

If there was no one left to stand guard over a place worth guarding, to remember, to really love this living, breathing, dying place on the river, then he must rise to meet the loss alone, must stand as one final witness.

He pushed himself up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for the half-empty can on the bedside table and took a long drink of lukewarm beer and stood up and ignored the sharp pain in his knees and back and neck as he reached for the doorknob. Light danced along the walls in the room. The doorknob, and even the hinges flashed their blinking reflections of the flames that shone through the windows. Skookum waited by the door, her tail knocking rapidly into the wall.

Someone shouted outside.

Norm looked down. He was still in his trousers. He'd been wearing the T-shirt for two days, or three. He'd lost count. He opened the wooden door and then the screen door, shutting it quickly behind him before the dog could get through. She barked. Norm stepped into the light and the heat and saw the silhouette of a man standing in the two or three dozen feet of dock between the front deck of the house and the wall of flames beyond him. It was a young man. He wore a coat. Smoke rose from his shoulders. It was the Millers' kid. From the middle marina. The kid started to shout. Norm nodded and waved for him to come over.

The wind was blowing the flames the other direction, but the heat and smoke and the ash still swirled around them. Flames poured from the boats, and the dock, and the grass along the shore. Blue flames. Red flames. Flames too bright for color. The young man was soaking wet. He shivered and shuffled his feet. Norm reached for a roll of line that hung from pegs along the wall facing the flames. He shouted for the boy to go get the ax from a trunk around back. The boy disappeared. Norm pulled the slipknot and the line fell in a loose pile at his feet. The boy came back and Norm grabbed the ax by the handle and said: "Follow me."

They made their way toward the heat of the flames to where the stringers of the house were attached to the dock with rusted chains and turn buckles at either corner of the building. No time to twist the turn buckles loose. He shouted to the kid. "Go pull that power cord!" and hopped down onto the stringer, placing his feet on opposite sides of the chain. When the boy was back on the deck, he told him to hold on to something, lifted the ax above his head with both hands, and brought it down. The blade glanced off the chain and sunk deep into the wet wood underneath. Norm looked up and nodded once toward the ax handle. The boy jumped down and wrestled the blade free and then drove it downward, through the chain, and into the wood with a loud "thwock." The corner of the house came loose from the dock with a lurch and they began to swing away, the whole floating home pivoting on the one remaining chain. Norm climbed stiffly onto the deck, grabbed the line where he had let it drop, and started winding it around a large cleat under the deck rail. He looked up just as the boy swung the ax down toward the second chain and missed. He heard

the crack of the handle and the splash of the ax head falling into the river. The boy turned.

Norm shouted. "Goddamnit, kid!"

The boy shrugged. Sparks and ash swirled between them.

Norm wound several half hitches around the cleat and pulled the line tight. He looked up and the boy was still there, looking down at the chain. Norm stood up painfully and shouted. "Don't just stand there! Make yourself useful! Go piss on that fire or something!"

Norm hollered at him to go around to the side of the house where he would find a Danforth and a chain in a small, wooden crate against the wall. The boy shook his head and shrugged again.

"Danforth, dipshit!" Norm shouted. "A fucking anchor, you know, sticks in the mud at the bottom of the river? Go! Go! Go!"

The young man didn't move. He pointed at Norm with the broken handle. "*I'm* the one who came to wake *you* up, old man! I came to save *you*! When should I start second-guessing myself?"

Norm stormed back into the house and came out again with the shotgun. The boy looked around frantically as if looking for a place to jump. He stepped backward off the stringer and back onto the dock. The flames roared behind him. Norm walked brusquely over to the edge of the deck where the boy had been. Standing over the chain, and bracing one leg against a railing, he brought the stock to his shoulder and sighted down the barrel, aiming for the center of the taut chain. The gun exploded and the chain wrenched free.

"Jump!" he shouted, "Get on, unless you want to swim!"

The young man jumped.

They stood for a moment, watching the dock slowly recede. They were under way. The current took them into the wind. The young man coughed and said he would go look for that anchor. Norm wrapped the line around the cleat several more times. Then the boy was at his side again, coughing, dropping the crate down on the deck. Norm looked him in the eyes.

"You know your knots? Can you tie a bowline?"

"Not really."

"Not really? Just say 'no' if you can't do it."

"OK, no."

"Here. Feed the line through the chain. Hold both ends like this. Now, make a loop in the standing end. No, that one. No, twist the loop the other way. OK, take the free end and feed it through the loop. Now: rabbit comes out of the hole, goes around the fence, goes back into the hole and pull her tight. There you go."

The sound of the fire was fading. The flickering light grew dim and smoothed over their faces. "There's a lot of things you can go through life without young man, but a bowline isn't one of 'em. Now you'll never forget that knot if you live to be three hundred years old, will you? Might even save your own life some day."

The boy nodded and started to say something, but Norm turned and walked toward the side of the house, the gun dangling from his hand by the barrel. He spoke loudly over his shoulder. "Wait another thirty seconds and then drop that anchor in the drink. I'm going 'round back to get the skiff started. Come on over when you're

done unless you want to hang here in the current playing with yourself. I'm going to check on the rest of the marina."

The boy stood up, the line still in his hands, and called after Norm. The dark night drew close in the air around them. "I'm sorry," he said.

Norm stopped but didn't turn around. "It's twenty-*five* seconds, now, kid," he said. "You take that sorry, and that anchor, and you throw them in the goddamn river where they belong. Come on back when you feel her dig in." Norm opened the screen door and set the gun on the floor just inside. The screen started to creak shut. Skookum bolted out, stopped short when the door slammed home, stared once at the boy and then followed Norm around to the back of the house.

On the skiff, half inside the small pilothouse, Norm turned the key and fired up the two-stroke engine. Around the other side of the house, the young man, Chris, dropped the anchor into the water with a splash. Over the surface of the river, just downstream, the bright horn of the barge sounded through the night air.

* * *

Saturday morning, two days after the fire, Norm's house still hung from its anchor in the current downstream from the marina. Rich's hands were full without Chad or even Larry around to help run the fuel dock, and the place was crowded. Rich tried several times to call Chad's cell phone to let him know what happened, but couldn't reach him. The news helicopters and even the news vans from Portland had come and gone, moving on to some other local story since the possibilities of this one seemed to have dried up. Chris gave several interviews and said Norm's name on the air, which pissed Norm off quite a bit. The news people tried to approach Norm,

cameras rolling, to get him to talk about the fire, about his history in the place, about how he felt about everything, but Norm turned up the heat in his vocabulary until they finally turned off the cameras and left. The news teams even tried to get the young boy, Keith, to talk. Rumor had it that Keith was on the Susan K the night of the fire. The barge pilot found him on the island, stunned. He didn't talk, even to his father and mother, for a whole day after.

In the two days since the fire, dozens of tenants congregated at the store in the morning and late into the night, drinking coffee or beer and telling and retelling their fire stories: what had woken them up, what so-and-so had been shouting, the boxes and clothes and TVs they had been hauling frantically onto shore, what they had smelled in the air, what they had told or not told the reporters. People spoke in hushed tones. Often, the whole crowd was quiet while they listened to one person tell their version, and often, people spoke with heavy hearts or tears in their eyes. There were people there whom Norm had never seen, boat owners who lived far away and hadn't come to check up on their property for years, until now. Everyone claimed a piece of the suddenly clear sense of solidarity on the dock.

Chad was still away and no one had ordered any beer for the store, so Rich quickly sold out of most of the beverages. Dory ran two trips into Scappoose on Friday for Budweiser and Red Dog, and then once more for coffee.

There was a precariousness about the place, a renewed sense of the moving water underfoot. No one could sleep. Thoughts and tongues and homes had lost their moorings and life dangled by a thin line anchored unseen somewhere in the mud at the bottom of the river. Each breath and each word spoken or heard was a gift,

something worth revisiting again and again, and the words hung in the air like ripe fruit dangling heavily in the wind, ready to be plucked and savored before they fell to the ground.

Among the new faces on the dock, old faces came out of hiding. Old grudges were dropped or temporarily forgotten. Everyone wanted to hear what everyone else had to say too badly to let tension - or sobriety - get in the way. There were folks Norm usually cared not to speak to or even to look at who now extended their hands toward him, or clapped him on the shoulder, or passed him a cold, unopened can of beer. Norm told about what happened over and over until his voice was hoarse, not stopping to ask whether or not he liked the sudden shift in the marina. He let it be what it was and wondered to himself what it would become as time passed, what might be rising out of the ashes of the old history to unfold its wings in the new.

Employees from the boat yard worked through the weekend. Late in the morning on Saturday, they used a tug to move Norm's house from where it hung at anchor. There was no room left in the lower marina. All that was left at the downstream end were the charred remains of a dozen boats and boat houses, and where the main walk had been, there were only the stringers left bobbing in the water, long, neat rows of thick, black nails sticking out of them like jagged bones or teeth. The Coast Guard had set up a long, yellow boom around the area to contain the spilled fuel and debris. As the tug slowly pulled him upstream, Norm watched from the front deck of the house while the demolition cranes took apart the dock. At Norm's request, the men from the boat yard made a space for his home on the very end of the marina on the upstream side, up the main walk from the fuel dock. "That

way," said Norm, "I'll be able to see every last piece of bullshit that comes floating along toward this place."

On that Saturday afternoon, two days after the fire, with the help of twice as many hands as were necessary, Norm's house was finally secured in the upper marina at the very end of the dock, just upstream from Larry's boat and right next to Edmo's old spot, which was still empty almost a year later. When Norm finally plugged his power cord into the new meter, there was a strained silence in the small crowd on the dock in front of the house. Norm stepped across the threshold toward the front door, waved, thanked them all and shut the door behind him. Everyone slowly filed away. Norm sat down in the rocker and looked at the old walls that needed new paint and at the strange, new sights outside each window. There was an abandoned osprey nest at the top of a piling fifteen or twenty feet out from shore. He thought then about how the fire had taken everyone's attention away from Larry's departure, how no one seemed to even notice the absence of the life that had been rooted here. Now that everyone had gone, and the dock grew quiet, Norm stepped outside and walked over to Larry's boat, keys in hand. They would be neighbors now if Larry ever made it back.

Norm found the spiral-bound notebook on a table in the midst of several stacks of books. A pair of reading glasses rested on the top of one of the stacks of books. On the inside back cover of the notebook, Norm read two paragraphs that stopped him short for a while, his eyes straining over the large letters. He made his way back to his house and opened the refrigerator door. The beer was about gone again.

He wondered if Larry had composed the words inside the notebook himself, or if he had copied them down from one of the books he had seen on the table.

No, it was him. Quiet, that one.

Back in the house, sitting in the rocker, Norm read the two paragraphs again:

> "Some things can't be fixed or healed once they are broken. Some things, or people, get hurt or broken and then just stay the way they are, just keep breathing though they don't know why anymore or what light or life might still be there, still growing inside them, or fading. Does that light grow? Or does the world around it merely get darker so that you see it more?
>
> I have a hunch that the world is darker than I could ever imagine and that there is less reason for hope than I am able to see. It makes me grateful that there is only so much I can see, that I am left mostly with questions, and grateful, also, that hope is not a reasonable thing, for reason fails me. Though I have seen my share of darkness, I am spared perceiving much of it. And here is why I hope beyond a reasonable doubt: I think that as the darkness grows, it makes even the dim lights that are left seem all the brighter. And the more the darkness, the brighter the light becomes, until it is so luminous, even the falling shadows are filled with it."

Norm closed the notebook and stared out the window at the abandoned nest. Large rocks marked the entrance of the creek where water drained from the hills and the highway and under the railroad tracks through a large aluminum pipe just visible

through the trees. He read the words again. The current pushed against the upstream side of the house, much stronger here than below where the marina broke it into a confusion of swirls and counter-currents. Here, the pure force of the river split and moved down either side of the house. Through the window on the upstream side, he watched where the river came around the bend in the distance. The house was turned 180 degrees from the way it had been, and the window where he had sat waiting for the red speedboat no longer faced the river and the island shoreline. Maybe he'd mount a "NO WAKE ZONE" sign on the outside of that upstream wall tomorrow, get the help of Mike and Doris' artistic kid to paint a skull and cross bones next to the words.

Norm browsed a little more here and there through the journal and then said "the hell with it," read it from the first page to the last. When his eyes began aching, he went back over to Larry's boat for the reading glasses he had seen.

Back at his own house, he finished the journal and set the glasses on the end table. The dock moved differently on this end of the marina. More shifting and rocking. When he was done reading, he watched the horizon through the window to get his bearings, slowly stood up, opened the front door and walked down to the fuel dock to see if he could borrow Rich's truck. When he got to the hospital, the nurses told him that Larry had flown east yesterday morning, that his condition wasn't improving, but that he was in good hands.

* * *

The store was quiet later that evening when Norm stepped in and made his way over to the beer fridge. A rainstorm had moved in. The past few days, there had

been a crowd in front of the store but now, the dock was empty and the rain seemed even louder on the water, on the dock, on the roof of the store, like the beating of countless wings. Rich was at his desk talking softly to the boy, Keith and the father. Norm overheard something about insurance claims and forms they would need to fill out. They talked quietly, but Norm took his time and listened. Keith would be at fault for the fire, Rich said, but there would be no repercussions aside from the incident going on a police record. He would have to work a dozen or so hours of community service and then it would basically drop there. Apparently, vandalism by a minor looked better on the marina's insurance record than the negligence of the management and years of possible lawsuits.

Norm cleared his throat and walked over toward the desk.

"Hold it a minute there, captain." Norm looked from Rich, to the father, to Keith. The boy sat wide-eyed on a wooden stool, his bandaged feet dangling just above the ground. The boy's life jacket moved faintly as he breathed.

Rich propped his elbows up on the armrests of his chair and linked his fingers together. "Norm, this really isn't any of your business."

Norm looked down at Rich. "Like hell it isn't. You think I don't know what was going on down there? I've seen that Robinson guy on his Susan K and he ain't been fixing it up for sale, if you know what I mean. Everybody knew that guy was gonna try and sink his own boat. In fact, I saw him down there the night of the fire, in case you hadn't heard. Saw him running off down the dock before the fire started to spread. Why do you think nobody can get a hold of that guy now?"

Keith's dad looked up at Norm. "Listen. That's not what Keith said. He said he lit the match and then the fire started spreading. Isn't that right, Keith?"

Keith looked at the floor. "Yeah. But there were other guys down there on the boat too."

"What? What guys? You mean your friends? Who was down there? Why didn't you say something about it?"

"No, not my friends. There were two guys. I tried to light a match after they left."

Rich pinned his eyes on Keith. "I thought we went over this. Did you just *try* to light it, or did you really do it?"

"I don't know. I think I did."

Norm asked Keith where he had got the matches. Rich glared. "Norm, what the hell are you doing?"

"Come on, Rich. Let the boy answer."

"In a drawer on the boat," Keith said. "On Susan K."

"Do you still have the matches?"

"Yeah, I think I do. They're probably still in my coat pocket. Yeah, they're right here."

Norm stared at Rich until Rich looked away, shaking his head and sighing.

The matches were old and brittle. They broke into pieces when Keith tried to strike one on the soft, wet side of the box. Rich stood up and said they would have to change their plans and figure out what to say to the insurance company in the morning. Keith's father passed a stack of papers across the desk.

After the father had lifted his son up into his arms and carried him out of the office, Rich offered Norm a seat. He wrinkled up the pieces of paper and threw the wad over the counter toward the center of the store. "What the hell was that, Norm? What a goddamn mess! It would take years to clear this thing up in courts and with lawyer fees and all. You think that Robinson guy is going to just confess and take the hit? We all know what happened. It's just paperwork we're dealing with here."

"Paperwork, huh? And what about that kid who'd have to grow up innocent without ever knowing it? And what about Robinson collecting money for setting fire to his own fucking rig? So, I guess the truth doesn't matter around here even when it's staring you in the face, huh, Richard?

"What's this about *truth*? There's only paperwork in this business, Norm. And what the hell do you care? Don't you have better things to do than to waltz in here like a goddamn Kojack? It doesn't suit you, Norm. And I thought you were leaving, anyway. Didn't you have some place on the coast you were gonna buy sometime at the end of summer? Why do you do this to me?"

Rich let his forearms fall limp onto the armrests, his hands dangling loosely from his wrists. Norm smiled, then; a dumb grin that wouldn't let go of him once it started. He got up and turned stiffly toward the door, but changed his mind and leaned over the counter to face Rich again. "I'm just interested in stories, Rich. And folks around here are wearing their fire stories pretty thin don't ya think? Be good to hear some new ones, you know?"

"So, you're leaving at the end of summer? You know, sometimes I don't know whether to kick you out or try to convince you to stay. Somehow, I don't think it would matter a lick what I said either way."

"Come on, Rich. You know I'm just full of bullshit. I'm not going anywhere." He walked to the door, turned, and held the can up above his head, his smiling face looking down to where Rich sank back in his chair. "See you later, Richard. Go ahead and put this on my tab."

Lines on the Water

Larry's Journal

How to Join Earth and Sky

Monday, April 21

There is another world on the surface of the water, an upside-down version of this one. It's one of the obvious things that you lose sight of by living on the water. There are other things too, washed over by familiarity. Quiet miracles that become part of the landscape, like how the dock floats on the water under your feet and how the tide lifts the surface of the river, changing the waterline. You walk over sections of the dock and sometimes you can see your own reflection through the cracks in the floorboards. But you forget. You get to where you don't look at the wingtips of barn swallows (lightly brushing) tapping at their reflections, the clouds, and at night, the inverted star formations. The current isn't often strong enough to wash away the reflections. The surface moves, but the reflections don't, unless they are scrambled by the wind. Sometimes, the obvious stuff is the most amazing, and you can go right by it.

I remember once during one of my first masses, while I was giving the gospel reading, rain began to come down wildly on the roof. It pelted louder and louder and I spoke louder and louder to be heard above it. It became one of those moments that you don't get taught how to handle in seminary, one of those unmanageable (times) instances when you have your responsibility before you, but there is no appropriate way to continue in it. The clatter on the roof went on and I saw that something bigger than responsibility was presenting itself, and the only way to proceed was to stop and somehow acknowledge it. Or maybe it was merely the sound of my own booming

voice that surprised me to silence, since I usually never spoke up properly, even from the pulpit. I stopped in mid-sentence and looked up at the faces in the room through the air still thick with incense. The congregation had grown very still, even the children, and the rain roared louder, like a thunderous applause and I knew that if I was going to speak again that I would either have to wait or speak louder than I ever imagined I could be in this lifetime. I had no way of knowing how long the rain would continue. I looked up to the sky, since that was the direction the sound came from - from on high - and when I finally looked back down and still didn't speak, everyone smiled, as if in relief.

The pause in my sermon must not have lasted very long, but it is all I remember of that day – one of the few things I remember of that short time after seminary and just before the war. The pounding rain had said what needed saying better than I could have - a deeper sorrow and joy and power than what I could have known as a young man who hadn't yet seen the horrors of war. Sometimes I can still hear that rain coming down louder and louder and I think of my silence there behind the lectern as an act of worship rather than one of inhibition or fear, unless it is what Solomon called "the fear of the Lord." I don't remember what happened after the rain calmed down. I assume it must have at some point. It is one of those memories that remain with me, the rains still pounding loudly, even underneath the sounds and silences of the present. Under it all, the waters are still there, pouring down.

Wednesday, April 23

Even if I had authority, who around here would be interested? I suppose it depends on what people want, or what they wish they could want. People come to me for advice on fishing because I have something they want. And I offer the little that I know. It is never enough, but it opens the way for them a little as they search the dark waters with a hook and a line, hoping for what might come.

Sunday, April 27

Often, when I see children on the dock, and the adults they are becoming, I see them making what they can of what they have been given. I see in them the infants I have failed to bless over the years, those that might have been helped along a little by those blessings. It seems as if I have surrounded my life with an overabundance of river water in order to make up for the lack of blessings that have might have come from water dripping off my fingertips. Every day, I see grown men and women stumble down the ramp who have never taken a sober step on the dock since I have known them. They, too, seem to be the fruit of my own lack of faithfulness over the years. I know this is more a feeling than a thoughtful consideration, and a judgment upon lives that I do not know, a gross indulgence of mine, but I am beginning to feel these stings to my conscience much less these days as I offer what has always been the little that is there for me to offer. Sometimes, I do offer words of blessing in my mind for children when they enter the store clamoring for candy or ice cream, or for the older ones, cigarettes, or beer. Some of those things make their way across the counter with a feeble prayer attached to them. They are

tentative blessings at best. The lives of others are mostly none of my business, especially to affect them unbidden, if I really believe in the possibilities of a blessing. I don't always know what is best to do when I sense some need and find the burden of a blessing resting lightly in my hands. It seems better sometimes to not believe in any of it, if only that were a choice I felt I could make.

In my worst moments, I think that maybe no good can come from good, for even the good intentions of a quiet prayer may bring more hurt later on when additional loss rips through the lives of those touched by it. A blessing often seems to be swallowed up, like a drop of fresh water into the salty ocean. Light fills the bead of water for a moment and then it is gone. What good is a prayer or a blessing in the face of loss, or in the face of longing? Somehow, it must be sufficient to have seen that drop suspended in the air, and to remember that it existed for a moment in the world, under the sun, over the water, before it falls into what it will become.

It seems to me that Love wants to make itself known as much as it wants to remain hidden, to throw off any attention that might become too fixed on itself, or on the one offering it. To believe in Love is less to argue for an idea than it is to trust that perhaps there exists a Love that seeks not to control but to fill the best and worst of our gestures with goodness we would ask for if we could only think of it.

Friday, May 2

People who notice things sometimes notice other people noticing things.

Chad was pretending to work at his computer today but he was actually typing up something that looked like a poem. He looked over at me and I told him I liked to

write a little too, sometimes. He closed the window on his computer screen and said that he had just been making a list. He and I haven't spoken much since I gave him a hard time for accidentally leaving the store unlocked overnight a while back. He seems to have come to his conclusions about me, and I don't entirely blame him. I cannot say that I have been his friend in times when he clearly needed a friend in this place.

I left a couple of quotes from Rilke on the store counter recently. Chad found them and placed them in his pocket next to that little book he writes in sometimes. He is looking over his shoulder toward the door more these days and looking hopefully into the eyes of whoever comes in, as if searching there for evidence of Rilke. He usually never bothers to glance in my direction where I sit reading the newspaper.

Monday, May 19

Jack and Edith left today. Last night, a bunch of us got together. I told Chad he should come along too. We drank some wine I had brought along and told stories about Edmo. It seems we all had more to say about Edmo, even Chad, which didn't surprise me too much.

Wednesday, May 21

Chad is planning a trip down to Astoria for sometime in July. He asked if I could help hold down the fuel dock for a week or two while he makes the trip. He says he wants to cross the bar and sail in blue water. I brought over some charts and a

tide book and showed him where to wait over at Hammond bay for the beginning of a slack tide and for the weather to cooperate, if it came to that. That should give him just enough time to get out there a ways, lose his lunch and then head back in on the slack tide wondering why he had bothered. I don't know what he expects to find out there. He's not bringing any gear for fishing. Probably, he wants to see "blue water," to be able to say he'd been there. I hated to tell him the water's not really blue. The more striking feature is its immenseness, its endlessness. How could I tell him? You have to find out some things for yourself. And yet, who am I to say what one person will find or not find, just because I have or have not found it?

Sunday, July 13

I looked up the word "authority" again in the Oxford English Dictionary at the library. A couple of the definitions get at some of my recent considerations:

- "Power to influence the conduct and actions of others; personal or practical influence."
- "Power to inspire belief, title to be believed; authoritative statement; weight of testimony. Sometimes weakened to: Authorship, testimony."

The "power to influence the conduct of others" sounds a little like the man in the plaid shirt. And the "power to inspire" is what the priest wants. That is what is expected of the priest, anyway.

Maybe I have rejected the exercising of authority all these years because to have it is to have it OVER something or someone. I'm not interested in that, unless it's authority over the belt-men of the world. But then again, who am I to decide who

the belt men in the world are? Maybe all they need is another few hours in detox. Maybe what I want is authority that serves UNDER things, under people, under ideas, under beauty - authority that knows and loves what it knows.

The kind of authority that comes from the author and finisher of our faith. The guy who kept saying, "Love one another."

Monday, July 14

> "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of *the law" (Holy Bible NIV, Mathew 7. 28-29).*

> "So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, 'Who is it you want?' 'Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'I am he,' Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing with them.) When Jesus said, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground" (Holy Bible NIV, John 18. 3-6).

Saturday, July 19

Chad left on his trip today. He's taking two weeks for it. Just before he took off, I handed him the William Stafford poem that was handed to me at the protest. I thought Chad was going to do a damn cartwheel right there on the dock. He ran

inside and got a whole book of Stafford poems out of his desk and told me I could have it.

I gave him some signal flares when I found out he didn't have any, and a bottle of single malt scotch and told him it was the kind of fuel that boats used to run on back in the day. I told him to not put it in the gas tank though. I told him to try to avoid using the noisy engine as much as possible, to learn to listen to the wind in the hours and days under the force of its unseen hand. Well, I didn't actually say it like that, but he nodded like he knew what I meant.

Tuesday July 22

I'm trying to exercise more in the rowboat. It's been an off-and-on thing for me since I started sailing and fishing and reading more. The doctor says I need to be consistent with it or it will just strain my body instead of helping it. He suggested getting a stationary bike instead of rowing. Yeah right, I'll just set up an exercise bike on the fuel dock and wave at folks as they go by.

Friday, July 25

It has been a busy week helping out at the fuel dock with Chad gone. Rich told me to take the weekend to rest a little and he even gave me a paycheck too - my first in years. I bought myself a new fishing pole and some expensive bottles of spirits from that locked case behind the counter at the liquor store. The owner raised his eyebrows at me.

I've got to get away from the marina for a couple of days so I can think. Maybe I'll head up the Columbia for the weekend. See how far I get.

Monday, July 28

"I'm saved in this big world by unforeseen
friends, or times when only a glance
from a passenger beside me, or just the tired
branch of a willow inclining toward earth,
may teach me how to join earth and sky" (Stafford, 170).

I caught a sockeye on the Columbia during my short vacation the other day, or I guess maybe it was the fish that caught me. They are on the endangered species list for this whole river system. I haven't seen one in years.

The wind was steady at about five knots in the late afternoon when I set the anchor and dropped a fishhook in. A minute later, I got a bite - something big. I only had ten pound test line on, which would never hold anything this big for very long, so I flipped the bail and let it spin away while I hauled in the anchor and started the engine. It turned over, but then puttered to a stop. I tried the engine again. Nothing. I was drifting away from the fish. The spool of line slowed for a moment, as if waiting for me to catch up. I raised the main, and then the jib, and ran with the wind. The fish must have been a whole hundred yards ahead of me by then. Several powerboats passed over the water between the fish and me, just above the taut line, but it didn't break.

Then I checked the fuel level. The tank was empty. I usually filled it once a year, in August, but I'd been using the boat more. It had snuck up on me. The fuel station was sliding by along the Oregon shore. I considered cutting the fish loose, reeling in and letting its jaw bite through the line so that I could go fill up on fuel, but I really didn't want to let it go. I could sense I had a hold of something worth pursuing, something more than just a fish. We went by the cafe at Harbor One, by the fuel dock, by Salty's, and by the airport control tower rising just above the shoreline.

The line kept going slack. I kept reeling in. The line led me down the south side of Government Island. The 205 bridge hung above the water up ahead, much lower on the south side of the island than where I had sailed before on the north side. I looked up at the masthead. There was no way I would fit. I got out a chart to check the bridge height, just to make sure. Impossible. And the water was shallower on this side of the island, too. Lots of sand bars. It was only a matter of time.

I was the only sailboat dumb enough to be in the shallow water on this side of the island, heading toward the low bridge. Cars sparkled in the sun on the bridge and along Marine Drive. Every once in a while, the fishing pole dipped toward the water and the life on the other end quivered up into my arm. It was something big. On a thicker line, I might have followed it all the way to the first fish ladder at Bonneville.

Except there was that bridge that stood in the way.

The keel whispered over sand, a soft trembling through the tiller in my hand. Even with the bridge drawing nearer, I felt peace, like a great fullness in my chest. There was music in the wind. A song that played in the sails and in the jib sheets, and the water and the sand in the tiller and the answering pulse of life carrying down the

thin line that pulled me upstream. The din of traffic from the bridge droned in the air, but there was music in that, even. The bridge loomed above me. In a moment, the end of the journey would come, and I felt no burden to change course. I had a hold of something that was the opposite of a burden, peace itself, as if peace were not silence but a song, and I wanted to keep a hold of it as long as I could.

Then, just beyond the bow pulpit, in front the dark shadow of the bridge, the sockeye leaped out of the water, her sides flashing red in the sunlight. The fish hung in the air for a brilliant moment before splashing down into the shadow of the bridge like a crashing cymbal. The line went slack. I reeled in madly then, holding the tiller between my knees. The bow of the boat passed into the shadow. My heart started pounding. I reeled in. The fishing line passed right below the keel and I kicked the tiller over, turning the boat parallel to the bridge. I leaned the fishing pole over the side and reeled in what was left of the slack and I could feel the line bend sharply around the edge of the keel. There was a quick jolt and then it snapped. I grabbed for the main sheet. The fishing pole dropped dead onto the deck. I leaned on the tiller and pulled the sheets tight. The wind filled the sails with a pop and the boat heeled over, the bow passing back into the sunlight. I closed my eyes and the insides of my eyelids flamed with red light.

The attendant at the fuel station threw me a line as I eased in alongside the dock and lowered the main. Another boat was parked at the pumps, a speedboat, but I left plenty of room, pulling the sailboat up to the dock nice and easy and spilled the wind out of the canvas. The boat came to a smooth stop. The attendant yelled

sharply as I approached. What the hell I was doing, crazy old man, pulling in under sail with another boat there? He handed me the hose and stood back, arms folded, glaring in my direction. There were several teenagers on the speedboat nearby. Two guys and a girl in a yellow bikini. They were glaring too.

While I filled the tank, the attendant said he'd seen me go by a bit ago, said it looked like I "had something on" while I was under sail. I told him I'd lost it. He shook his head. The gray cloth of his cap was worn at the seams. He had on a massive silver belt buckle sporting an image of a leaping trout. He took my money for the fuel, put it in his pocket and folded his arms across his chest. I waited until it became clear that he wasn't planning to give me change.

I was about to leave, but instead, I turned and spoke to him again about what happened, about the sockeye, about following it upstream under sail, about watching her jump red through the air right in front of me, about breaking the line on the keel at the last moment. While I spoke, a shadow seemed to pass over the man's face. An icy smile filled his mouth. He shook his head again.

The teenagers in the speedboat grew quiet as I told about the fish. One of them looked at the girl and they both rolled their eyes. After I got to the part where the line broke on the keel, they climbed into their speedboat and roared off downstream.

I turned to the gas attendant and stepped toward him, telling him about the fish, how red it was, like blood was pouring out of its side, it was so red. He stood firm and shook his head and said that I was full of shit, "You think I don't know that you ran out of fuel out there, and that's why you came in here with your fucking sails

up and your fucked up story about some fish that went extinct years ago?" I stepped toward him and said the fish was real, that they were still returning from the sea, that it was evidence of healing in the world. He started backing away, toward the door of the office behind him, his smile slowly fading. The words came spilling out of me, words about endangered species swimming right underneath the dock while he worked, and about how we were the ones in danger, too, in danger of missing the beauty right under our noses, about how love was there whether or not we could see it, just under the surface. It was in the wind that you couldn't hear or see, and you couldn't tell where it came from or where it was going, but you could put up a sail sometimes and listen for it, watch it play in the canvas and feel it pushing you along through the water. I said that love filled everything in every way, even our deepest losses and longings, and even after the guy's face went pale and he stepped inside and shut the door, I kept on talking. I turned and faced the river and talked and talked and I reached my hands out over the water and kept on saying what there was in me to say.

Sunday, July 27

My shoulder is aching horribly. I must have pulled a muscle or something, though it doesn't feel like a muscle, more like a general aching. A new heart has leaped into life in my shoulder, or something. Maybe some exercise in the rowboat this afternoon would help.

My mind is on that sockeye, wondering if she will make it to wherever she needs to get to. The Deschutes River or the Snake River, or even some small stream

up in British Columbia. I'd like to think that fish would carry some memory of me upstream with her. I suppose she won't be able to help it now as she swims through the gorge to climb the ladders, or die trying, all the while with a stubborn hook in her mouth, and eight or ten feet of line trailing behind her, drifting back in my direction.

Below the Waterline

It wasn't until the sailboat swung back eastward and I passed under the Astoria Bridge late in the night, heading upstream, that I was able, finally, to start writing like I had planned. I began by scrawling out an image of the lantern I had been lighting on deck after sunset, its soft glow swaying through the rigging, the lines luminous in the night air. Then came some thoughts about seasickness, and then my anxiety about the unseen dangers lurking just under the surface of the river - the rocks, logs and shipwrecks - all waiting to punch a hole through the bottom of the sailboat and maybe even make a widow of my wife and an orphan of my son.

I hadn't written much until then, partly because of the frantic attention I gave to the chart book and its depth soundings and symbols of underwater hazards, and partly because I kept dropping pencils into the river. The first day out, I sailed too close to the shore and the keel had slammed into something hard under the surface and I spent the next six days obsessing over what I could not see. To get my mind off it all, I tried to hide the chart book in the main cabin, but it never stayed down there for long. Finally, out on the Pacific, I set fire to the book and dropped it, burning, into a deep aluminum mixing bowl that I used for washing my hair in the morning and pissing in at night when I was too sleepy for climbing up on deck to lean over the rail.

Once I crossed the Columbia River bar, I sailed up and down the coast in the deep, rolling water for two days and a night, following the compass north to the tip of Long Beach, and then south, always into the wind, always keeping land just within sight. That first evening on the ocean, as the flames poured sideways over the lip of

the bowl away from the wind, I looked down at the water passing by, as if for the first time, and at the gray light flickering on the waves and at the lines in my hand, and I spoke out and said, "Hello, hello, hello," to one thing after another. Porpoise. Crane. The smell of the sea. The salt on my lips. Wave after wave of folding gray water.

Now, under the light of the moon, with the Astoria Bridge looming up ahead, the breeze blowing over the stern and the boom hiked out over the water, the wind scooped us into its arms until we ran with it, until I could barely feel its breath. The hull seemed to sigh with relief over the swells after a long week of heeling over into the wind and the lines taut and singing. Now the jib sheets hung in easy loops, warm and smooth in my hands. The lamp handle creaked softly. On the incoming tide, the water rushed upstream under the bridge, bubbling around the base. Upstream became downstream. The river was illusive here at the mouth. You could no longer properly call it a river. So many other voices pouring by. The smell of the sea hung in the air below the canvas. The light of the moon felt warm on the back of my hands.

* * *

Seasickness was only a memory by now, but in the first days of the journey, waves of nausea came and went as I approached the mouth of the river. I had slept very little because of it since leaving Rock Creek, and waving goodbye to Abby and our son. As long as I could see the horizon up on deck, or through the window in the main cabin, the dizziness wasn't too bad, but I needed to look up every ten seconds or so to orient myself. The worst was at night, in the darkness of the forward cabin, my head spinning violently. I threw-up three times in the first two days. Once, all over the chart book, and then again that night, into my pillow, in the dark, as the wind and

rain pelted the boat where it swung at anchor. The following morning, the anchor wouldn't pull out of the thick clay at the bottom of the river, so I jumped in and followed the line down and tried to pry the blade loose with my hands. Silt-covered branches brushed across my face and arms and chest like unseen fingers in the dark water. In the end, I had to cut the line loose, just above the anchor chain, and leave it down there. Back on deck, covered with a putrid, gray film from head to toe, the smell and taste of the river bottom on my lips, my breakfast lurched back out into the world.

It was the lantern that saved me from the dizziness later that night. I kept the flame going. The yellow light danced and swung from its hook above my bed in the forward cabin. The flame, my horizon, a fixed, flicker of movement, translated the river's dance to me in the dark, windowless cabin.

I didn't have any extra lamp oil and I couldn't find any in Astoria when I stopped there on my way toward the Pacific. Whatever was in the lamp would have to last. I shuddered to think that it might not.

* * *

I called Abby on the cell phone each evening, the emergency phone that she insisted I take along. I kept it turned off unless I was calling her, or checking to see if she had left any messages. I had no way to recharge the phone battery, and I wanted to keep the possibility of contact with her alive through the end of the trip. I could use the VHF radio if I had an emergency, or if someone close by did, and I could monitor the channels indefinitely.

But the radio was dead, I found out. While out at sea, I tried to check the weather report, and all I could hear was static. Something wrong with the antenna. After I returned to the moorage in Hammond Bay just inside the Columbia bar, I pulled myself up the mast with the help of a fisherman who was mending nets at the end of the dock. At the top of the mast, I respliced the frayed antenna wires. Strange: a penny had been bolted face-up to the top of the masthead. The year on it read: 1947. The birthday of the original owner, maybe. At the very top of the antenna, a dead spider clung to the small bead of aluminum, the highest point on the whole boat. The dry husk of its body trembled in the wind. I talked to it while I worked, wondering out loud how tight a grip it must have had in life. I asked if it had hidden the penny up here for safekeeping. The clouds rolled in on the wind. A drop of rain landed on Lincoln's head. The spider skin clung to the peak with its dry, transparent legs. I wound the black tape around the antenna wires and hollered to the fisherman for help down. The rain hit when my feet touched down on the deck. The fisherman waved and ran off and I climbed into the cabin and listened to the water rattle on the deck above.

* * *

In the days after I passed under the Astoria Bridge on my way upstream, I began writing about the river, the marina at Rock Creek, and the people who lived there. I wondered whether I really belonged there, or whether I ought to move on and find another job. Tenants were coming by the fuel dock in the recent months just to talk, and they seemed glad to have me around, but the marina employees were eying me with suspicion. I suppose they had reason to. Rich had started placing hidden

charges on boat yard bills and altering estimates after-the-fact. He didn't think anyone knew about it. I quietly removed the charges before the bills made their way to the customers. Then I stumbled upon several of the boat yard employees when they were siphoning fuel from boats in the dry dock and filling their cars and trucks. The men began eyeing me with grim faces whenever I was around.

Once, at the end of a workday, one of the guys in the yard accidentally left a fuel line unclamped on a large boat in the dry dock. Through the night and into the next morning, diesel slowly spilled over the concrete and into the pond behind the shop. The pond that drained into the river whenever the rain fell. No one seemed to know exactly how much fuel went into the pond. The boat was between owners, and its fuel log mysteriously disappeared. There was no telling how much fuel it was. The tank could hold two hundred gallons.

That morning, I rode the motorcycle from the main office down to the boat yard with some paperwork and found the shop deserted. Only Gina was there, and she was on the phone. I saw movement through the tall grass beyond the shop and made my way around back. A red film of diesel swirled over the surface of the pond. A dozen men worked along the shore, mopping at the surface, pushing absorbent pads over the pond with broomsticks. The grass along the shore glistened, its long, red blades bending heavily into the water. The yard manager paced the edge of the pond, trimming the grass back with a sickle. His faded, white overalls hung heavily from his shoulders, bright red up to the waist. Everyone kept quiet, not wanting to draw attention from the lower marina parking lot on the other side of a nearby field. The

men spoke to each other about loyalty to the marina, sending narrowed gazes in my direction.

I left. How could I remain loyal to a pond, instead? To a river?

I rode the motorcycle back to the upper marina and kept going, up the hill and down the highway, where I found a pay phone and made an anonymous call to the coast guard. When the officers arrived, Rich led them to a different pond on the edge of the marina property and convinced them it had been a prank call from a competing boat yard upstream.

As far as I knew, no one at the marina found out who had made the anonymous call, but the marina staff grew quiet whenever I happened to be in the room. I started finding pieces of red parchment paper in my desk drawer, folded in half, blank on both sides - if bright red can be said to be *blank*. And then there were a couple of quotes by Rilke left lying around as if for me. I couldn't make sense of it. Maybe I was just being paranoid. We had red paper in the back room that we brought out for printing Christmas fliers. Then again, it was July.

* * *

By the time I reached Sand Island late in the night on my return trip upstream, the last night of my journey, just across from Sauvie Island and the mouth of the Multnomah Channel, the lamp was still burning through the night, and I still wasn't sure if I was going to quit my job at the marina. I tied off the boat to the transient dock on the downstream side of the island, climbed ashore, and made a fire out of driftwood. I boiled coffee in a pot of water, sifted it into a large mug and wrote for

several hours in my notepad, stopping here and there to stoke the fire or add more wood or pour more coffee.

I had started writing about some of the liveaboards I had met at the marina, about Norm, Edmo, and Larry, random stories I had heard about them, or that they had told about themselves. I was pretty sure that most of them weren't completely true, but they were the only history I had to work with, official or otherwise. Most of what I jotted down was filled with large holes. I tried to fill in some of the holes until I no longer recognized the people I thought I knew.

It was getting late. The lights across the river in St Helens had mostly gone out for the night. It was the last night of the journey. I wanted to stay awake for it, to keep writing, but I was stuck, trying to write what I knew, and having it turn into various fictions.

I started making lists. The names of boats at the marina. The names of people. The things people had told me they'd lost in the river: keys, wallets, rings. Then, I launched into a story about my wedding ring.

* * *

I lost it to the river before Ethan was born, while we still lived on the boat. It had been my grandfather's ring, a gift from my grandmother.

Abby and I were cleaning the boat on the day it happened. I was shaking a rug over the water. The dust and breadcrumbs collected on the surface of the water and held there. On the final shake of the rug, the ring slipped off and bounced three times onto the dock and I saw its reflection on the water for a moment before the ring and its image joined in an instant and the river swallowed them both. The flecks of

dust hung on the water below me and then moved away with the current, and I was left gazing into my own wavering reflection. Up on the deck, Abby turned her head when she heard the sound and saw me leaning over the stern, not moving.

"Oh no," she said.

I turned to face her and nodded and closed my eyes.

* * *

The story seemed to end there on that final, hopeless note. What more was there to say? I had dropped many things into the river. Gone. The end.

I stood up, stretched, kicked the flaming wood apart with the toe of my boot, gathered my things and made my way toward the ramp that led from the north end of the island down to the dock. The metal grating on the ramp creaked underfoot. I thought I heard a faint chirping: a cell phone. My cell phone.

I must have left it on after I talked to Abby the other night. The ringing stopped as I climbed aboard. The small screen showed six messages: several from Rock Creek Marina, one from my sister, one from my parents, and one from my brother. Why hadn't I heard any of these calls? I'd been on the island all evening, and sailing some rough wind all day. Maybe that was it. I started dialing Abby's number and the phone went dark: the battery was dead.

No message from Abby. Something must have happened. Why would all these people call? It was an emergency cell phone. Why would my sister call? She hadn't called in months. Something happened. Our grandmother, maybe. Or Mom, or dad. But the marina called too. Something had happened Abby, or to our son, Ethan.

I should never have come on this trip. It was Saturday night. Abby had probably taken Ethan out to the grandparents, or to the park when it happened. An accident. Or a mugging. Fucking terrorists, for all I knew. Maybe the danger really was more imminent than any sane person might guess: terrorist attacks on small towns in the U.S., moving into the very heart of the country. Maybe it was all true.

Upstream, I could see the lights of a Bayliner tied off at another transient dock on the opposite end of the island. I fired up the inboard engine and motored over and was soon knocking my knuckles on the hull of the Bayliner. Clouds of smoke billowed out the back door and a head leaned out. I tried to keep my voice steady, said I had a possible emergency. Did they have a phone? Yeah, the guy said, but the battery was gone. He pointed across the channel to the marina on the St. Helens' shore, thought they might have a phone on the dock there.

I motored across the water, and tied off along a thin stretch of dock in front of several bathroom doors and then ran up and down the rows of boats and houses looking for a phone. Nothing.

It was finally happening. I hadn't installed Ethan's car seat tightly enough and it had crashed through the side window and rolled into oncoming traffic. I hadn't tightened the seat down enough. I thought it was tight, but it could have been tighter.

I walked the ramp and climbed around the locked gate, careful of the barbed wire that had been smashed by other climbers. I made my way through the parking lot, around the apartments and offices down by the water. Nothing was open. No pay phones down near the water. Up the hill and through a small park and around the

darkened courthouse. Finally, I found a phone booth in the park, but the receiver cord dangled in a mass of colored wires.

Small town. Every window I passed was dark, or boarded up. A street lamp hung above the small Episcopal church along the main street. Maybe there was a phone inside. I found an open window and yelled into it. Nothing. I reached up and climbed into the dark, stumbling into a pew. Lights from the street outside poured through the colored glass. The smell of old wood filled my nose.

What was I doing here, again? A phone. My hand passed over the pews as I made my way toward the front of the sanctuary. My footsteps echoed softly. I wiped at the layer of dust on one of the pews. Light through the window shimmered off the wood.

On the wall just inside the vestry, I found an old-fashioned phone receiver hanging from a panel with several push buttons. The line was silent. Great. How appropriate. I spoke into the receiver. I told my son that I loved him, and would see him soon, one way or another. I told him goodnight and I told my wife that I was sorry I had made such a long trip, that I had left her alone. I prayed to the silence on the other end and asked, for the sake of my family, for words that would work. I prayed, "Help." I prayed for their safety. I tried other prayers. I told God how good He was, how I had seen Him on the river, especially at night, when the moon was on the water.

And then I hung up the receiver and made my way back to the open window and climbed out into the empty street. Neon lights still glowed in the windows of a tavern down the road. I paced over slowly. The windows were dark: closed. Then I

remembered that there had been lights on in some of the boats down at the marina. Liveaboards. Phones. I jogged down the hill and through the parking lot. At the top of the ramp, I saw a large map of the marina. There was an icon of a telephone on the map down by the bathrooms, right where I had tied off the boat. No. There was no way. I would have seen it. The sign was wrong. Maybe the phone had been moved. I stepped down the ramp, climbed around the side of the gate and made my way down the dock.

The boat was still there when I rounded the corner by the bathrooms. No phone booth. The rest of the marina had grown quiet. All the windows were dark.

I climbed aboard and fished Larry's bottle of scotch from the cupboard and poured a little into the mug and then sat on the deck, my back to the mast.

Something must have happened at Rock Creek. Three voice mail messages from the office. But I didn't know for sure. I sat there, not knowing, not drinking but slowly growing still. The possibilities were endless. The store might have sunk. Maybe someone had died. But I let the possibilities drift away and began sipping at the gift in the mug in my hand. It was good, a little at a time. Smooth and warm. I usually hated hard liquor. Maybe I could get used to it. If my family was gone, maybe I would quit the job at the marina and join the others on the dock, drinking and telling stories. Maybe I would start seeing visions and having dreams and writing more. Maybe animals would start climbing aboard my boat at night and pulling the clothes from my body to use for building their homes in the trees along the shoreline. Maybe drinking would improve my prayer life.

More possibilities. I let them go.

I held the drink up into the air and toasted to the unknown, and over the rim of the mug, I saw the word TELEPHONE handwritten in black felt marker on a door next to the men's bathroom, right where the map said it would be.

On the other side of the door, I found a small closet with a folding chair, an ashtray, and a pay phone hanging on the wall. I fed coins into it and dialed. I didn't even bother to check my cell phone messages. I just started dialing numbers. I called Abby at home first. No answer. My heart began pounding.

I dialed my parents' number. Nothing. Their phone must have been turned off. I tried my brother. It went straight to his voice mail. I hung up and tried my sister. My brother-in-law answered, his voice heavy with sleep. He asked how it was going. I said: "Abby. Is she OK?" As far as he knew. He sounded tired and confused. He said something about a fire he had seen on TV, wondered if it was where I worked. I told him I didn't know.

I tried home again. Abby's voice. I sat down in the folding chair and ran my fingers through my hair. She said it had been a shitty night - literally. She had been changing a diaper when I had called before. There was still crap on her hands and on her pajamas. She was glad I had called. She and Ethan were fine, she said, they just couldn't wait for me to get home. Then she told me about the fire.

* * *

I tried the marina's main phone number. Nothing. Back on the boat, I found the number to Norm's house. I went back to the phone and paused. But then said what the hell and dialed the number.

When Norm picked up, I apologized for calling so late. He coughed and then cleared his throat. "Don't give me any of that sorry crap. You called. I was asleep. Now I'm not. I don't give a shit. I had to get up and piss anyway. Where the hell have you been? Working on your tan while the place practically burns to the ground?"

Norm talked on about the fire and then asked if I'd heard anything on the VHF. I told him about the dead radio, and about climbing the mast. I mentioned the penny mounted on the masthead, wondering if it was a practice he recognized.

"A penny, huh? That would be some previous owner's doing. Smart guy he must've been, though a bit excessive, I would think. You know what that penny's for?"

"No, I don't."

"Course you don't. It's an old trick. Before insurance. Before boat registration. You hid a penny onboard somewhere in case someone stole your boat or came along and claimed it was theirs. The owner would be the guy who knew where the penny was and what date was written under Abraham Lincoln's nose. I've got a few good stories about boat pennies I could tell you sometime. And not a shred of bullshit in any of them. That boat's truly yours now. But you probably didn't check the date on that penny when you were up there, did ya?"

"1947."

"Pretty good. There's hope for you yet. Except that now, of course, your boat could be mine, you numskull. Telling me the date."

"I guess I'll have to trust you."

Norm paused, coughed once more, and said, "Just to make it even, I got a 1923 penny under the foot of the wood stove at home. I forget which foot."

"I guess that makes us even, then."

"No guessing. It either does or it doesn't."

"Even, then."

"Goddamn right," he said.

After another long pause, he told me about Larry.

Before hanging up, Norm said to watch for the sand bar below Sauvie Island on my way up the channel. Said it was lined with old pilings resting just below the surface. "Just get your ass back here," he said, "Rich has been trying to run things in the office on his own, and you can imagine how well that's going. Somebody's gotta keep an eye on that guy."

* * *

I hung up the phone and crossed over to the island. With the lantern lit, I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I thought about Norm and Larry and tried to write, but was soon stuck again, wondering about these people I thought I knew, the ones I thought I would have something to say about. All I could come up with were half-truths and dead ends. Like the story I had written about the lost wedding ring.

Then I remembered the diver. Abby and I hired a diver to go down into the river after the ring. He was a man old enough to be my father. His hair was graying; his weathered face the color of wet sand. He removed one of the two rings from his left hand, fed a thin fishing line through the center and dropped it into the river where

I had pointed. "It's from my ex-wife," he said with a grin. "It's oh-so therapeutic throwing it into the river over and over again. Someday, I'll actually lose it for good."

We waited while the fishing line ran through his fingers, and then it grew still. He tied the line to a dock cleat and lowered himself into the water, following the fishing line down to the bottom. For half an hour, Abby and I watched the current bubble and churn from the air of the oxygen tank below.

When he came back up, mask still on, he shook his head. His wet suit was torn slightly at the shoulder. A hole the size of a silver dollar revealed a blood-red gash surrounded by red, pimpled skin. He removed the dark gloves and untied the fishing line, working the ring back onto his finger. I asked if he had seen anything. He smiled and said there was no seeing anything down there, even with the headlamp. The light of the sun faded into darkness at about ten or fifteen feet below the surface. During the spring runoff, he usually couldn't see the fishing line that led him down into the depths, even when the line was mere inches from the glass of his facemask. You just got to where you knew where it was, he said, even if you couldn't see it. Going down there wasn't about seeing anything, it was about feeling and sensing what you could through the thick gloves, which was quite a lot if you spent enough time below the surface.

He said he was pretty sure he knew where the ring was, but he couldn't get to it. There was a large mass of twisted metal that had dammed up a whole lot of other stuff below us: trees, tires, a shopping cart - a whole mound of debris over ten feet tall and several times as wide. There was no way to pull it all apart. Rust and years of pressure from the river current had locked it all together. I pointed to the hole in his

suit where the blood fell in a thin line down his arm and he nodded and said he'd better get going to clean out the wound. He said he'd been infected a number of times before from the toxins in the water. They almost had to amputate one of his legs once.

I pulled out my wallet to pay him, but he shook his head, threw the tank and the lead weights over his shoulder turned to walk away. "Tough luck," he said, "but look at it this way: you'll always know where the ring is."

* * *

All I could see were more dead ends. The storylines seemed to disappear into the dark or drift behind me in the current down to their frayed ends. All I could see were character sketches and random images. Unless I started forcing connections. Making things up in order to fill in the gaps. Bearing witness to what wasn't even real. I stuck to the image of the wedding ring. It was one of the clearest memories I had.

The ring struck the dock like a tiny bell, three times, on its way into the river. Its shadow passed beyond the wood planks of the dock and its inverted reflection flashed on the surface of the water. It was only an instant, but the image of the reflected ring hung suspended in my mind. For a brief, confused moment, before I understood what was happening, I saw two rings, rather than the one I knew. A stab of wonder and grief pierced my chest as one ring rose and the other fell and they joined with a small underwhelming *plop* that echoed and magnified in my ears like a crashing cymbal.

The diver was right. I would always know where that ring was, the one I had worn, the one that had begun to reshape my finger. But the other ring, somehow just as real for all its brief existence, hung in my mind too, and strangely, like a longing in my heart. Lost. It seems absurd, but a small portion of my grief over the loss of the real ring was also for the other one, the one I found for that brief moment before it too vanished into the dark water at the same time that it seemed to ascend into the gray sky. That ring should have been just a reflection, not worth noting. But something inside me would not let it be. Some strange corner of a strange inner life crying out to the tangible world of tangible rings that rest on the finger and flames that burn and lines that hold fast or lines that hang loosely in the hand, or guide to what lies in the vast spaces below the waterline.

The writing on the boat that night after the phone calls was becoming like that other ring, an inverted reflection, pulling the stories I wrote further away from what I knew to be true, filling in the gaps in the gossip I had heard second-hand, third-hand, even tenth-hand. I began to let go and write down what came. Was I writing fiction? Overly gracious non-fiction? Was *all* writing fiction? The categories suddenly seemed inadequate, since the discoveries I was making in the writing somehow rang true, whether or not I could verify them. The stories that came, about the people on the dock, were like those two rings. The river I wrote about, all the words and sentences about the place and its people, hung like a wavering reflection that could not contain what was real, and seemed inadequate for the purpose of capturing or accurately rendering the people I thought I knew, or even my own experience. And yet, even now, writing about these things years later, the stories are often what I

remember, though I know that they have drifted away from what my eyes have seen and my ears have heard and my hands have touched.

It is as if the very stories themselves need to offer this other way of seeing, as if a story, too, has a life of its own that gives a living perspective, speaks *about* our lives even as it speaks *into* them. The story lines that run through our lives pass within us and without, through unseen wind and water, quivering, going slack, or stretching and singing at the slightest touch.

* * *

When I got back to the dock at the island, I struck a match and reached quickly under the glass of the lamp while the match head continued its slow flaring into life. The flame caught the blackened tip of the wick, and the familiar golden light filled the cabin. I leaned the small picture of my wife and son back up against the wall on the shelf and kissed the glass in the frame and reached out for their faces. Then I bent over the notebook and wrote. Above me, the lamp leaned into the night, rocking and creaking, answering the pull and stretch of the dock lines outside. Each morning of the journey, I expected to see only the darkened glass of the lantern. But each morning, I reached up and rolled the glowing wick down to snuff out the flame for the day.

The final morning of the trip, as the sky began to lighten in the east and turn blue, the flame still burned, its light unwavering in the glow of the rising sun. I climbed up on deck and hung it from the back of the boom while I loosened the mooring lines and raised the sails. The windows of the other boats were still dark. I pointed the bow back downstream and the wind carried me quietly around the island.

The lights of St. Helens were beginning to blink on as the sun rose over the Cascades. From the center of the Columbia, I turned toward the channel and adjusted the sails. The small lighthouse on the northern tip of Sauvie Island seemed to glow dimly in the early morning light. I thought the lighthouse had been abandoned long ago. Whether it really shined on its own that morning or merely reflected the light of the sun, I don't know. Maybe both.

I finished sailing that full circle around Sand island to in order to watch the street lights of the town play on the water and through the trees along the island shore, in order to see the whole island once more, but mostly I went that way so that I would have a chance to heed Norm's advice and steer clear of the sand bar and the submerged pilings between Sand Island and Sauvie Island. From the middle of the river, the mouth of the Multnomah Channel looked more like a small bay. You could go right by it if you didn't know it was there. When I reached up to hike the boom out further, the back of my hand brushed the warm lantern where it hung from the boom. Inside, the flame still burned. With the sun rising behind me, I passed between the two islands, giving both of them a wide berth.

Works Cited

Buber, Martin. I and Thou. Trans. Walter Kwufmann. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.

De Chardin, Pierre Teilard. Hymn of the Universe. New York : Collins, London and Harper and Row, 1965 – Fontana Books 1970.

Holy Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985.

Holy Bible: New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

Merton, Thomas. Thomas Merton Reader. Revised Edition. Ed. McDonnell Thomas, P. A. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co, 1974.

St Teresa of Avila. The Interior Castle ("The Mansions") Trans. E. Allison Peers. London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1944.

Stafford, William. The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1999.

Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912.